FATIMA FAYEZ

DRAGON WARD

STRANGE MAGIC BOOK 1

Dragon Ward

Fatima Fayez

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Introduction

Dear Reader,

This book is a prequel to the *Strange Magic* series. Enjoy diving into this magical world set in Barcelona, Spain.

For fans of the *Aisha Bone* series you'll discover some Easter eggs that I hope will delight you.

Happy reading!

Fatima Fayez

I was walking around the Gothic Quarter in Barcelona as usual, looking for new gargoyles to photograph when something shoved me aside. I fell to my knees as a loud crash erupted near me. Dazed, I glanced back and saw pieces of shattered stone where I had just been standing.

Shaken, I got to my feet and looked around me to see who had pushed me out of the way, but I was alone. I raised my head to the tall cathedral facade to see where the stone had come from. I couldn't spot anything out of the ordinary. There didn't appear to be any broken architecture or missing gargoyles. I looked back at the stone that had nearly crushed me. A flyer had landed near the stone. I walked over and picked it up.

An ice cream vendor ran over to me, concern etched on his face. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," I lied, still shaken by the near miss. I clutched the flyer in my hand. "Thank you."

His eyes roamed over me as if searching for something to contradict my statement and his gaze hitched at my knees. I glanced down and saw the tear in my brand-new jeans. A small patch of dark blood was beginning to bloom through the denim. I forced myself to smile at the vendor. My face felt tight and I wondered what I must look like to him.

"There's a small fountain around the corner. You can clean off the dirt there. Take care of yourself," the ice cream man said finally. He walked away, peering back at me one last time.

I allowed myself to wince. After having seen the injury, I could feel the throbbing of my scraped knee. I bent down and cursed softly. There wasn't much blood, but my stepmother was going to call me wasteful because I had managed to rip my jeans so soon. I'd have to figure out a way to convince her that they had always been like that. But first I'd have to wash out the telltale blood.

I made my way to the fountain that the vendor had told me about. I realized I still clutched the flyer. I shoved it in my back pocket. I cleaned away the bloodstain and sat down, trying to stretch out the growing stiffness that was already in my knees. I watched as people milled around me, taking in the sights of the famous Barcelona Cathedral.

I had been coming here nearly every day since I moved to Barcelona only a few months ago. The rest of my family seemed to have adjusted faster than I had. My father was busy with his new job while my stepmother went out to network for her consultancy. My brothers seemed to thrive in this new location. Being away from my mother was doing wonders for them. Not that they saw her much anyways. She was my mother, not theirs, but my stepmother made

them visit from time to time. She had wanted my mother to feel that she still had a family.

It was difficult to see my mother often with her restricted visiting hours in the mental facility. She had entered it so long ago it had just added strain to our family. My father forbade me from visiting her alone after the second time she tried to kill me. To be fair, he hadn't known about the first attempt. And then he had made the decision to uproot us and start over in a new city. It seemed my father was right; moving away was the best thing for our family.

Part of me still felt conflicted about leaving her behind with only my aunt to visit her. She may have tried to kill me but she was still my mother.

Apart from leaving my mother, moving away didn't make as much of a difference to my life as it had for my brothers. I had always been a loner. I preferred it that way. My loneliness started with my mother's troubles, but then I just became comfortable with not having friends. I preferred to bury my nose in a book or go explore. I loved wandering the streets of Barcelona, discovering the different neighborhoods and finding out who lived there. There was so much to do that I could never get bored.

I shifted and I remembered the flyer still tucked away in my back pocket. I pulled it out and smoothed over the crumpled paper. In large bold letters it read, MUST LOVE DRAGONS. Below that, it said:

Do you love dragons?

Do you seek adventure and excitement?

Are you ready for your life to change?

The Dragon Research Initiate Program is a youth initiative aimed at young members of the community.

To be eligible for the program, applicants must be between the ages of 16 and 18 and must be residents of Barcelona.

Visit the Dragon Research and Authority Center for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

I looked at the date and time on the flyer. I checked my watch; I had half an hour before they closed. The address was nearby, less than fifteen minutes away. I glanced at the words one more time and decided to trust in fate.

I got to my feet and ran.

Chapter 2

The address on the flyer led me to a huge castle. I stood there and gaped. It was made of brick and iron and clearly very old. The building's facade was an architect's dream with its intricate carvings and archways. It had four towers at the corners and battlements along the top. All it was missing was a moat. The palm trees that surrounded the castle further ruined the illusion.

I made my way closer to the entrance. The wooden door was easily twice my height. A bronze plaque near the door said Dragon Research and Authority Center. Gargoyles covered the building, more than any other building I had seen in the Gothic Quarter. Almost all of the gargoyles were dragons. I wanted to study them, but I only had five minutes before the Center closed.

I pulled back the wooden door by its metal doorknob, expecting resistance due to its size and weight, but the door was surprisingly light. I stepped inside and blinked, my eyes adjusting to the dimness of the foyer. A strong scent of sandalwood tickled my nose. I breathed it in. There was a large ornate desk in front of me. A boy not much older than I was sat behind the desk. He didn't look up at my entrance. He had wavy brown hair that reached his shoulders. To my left there were three hallways. I briefly wondered where each one of them lead.

"Hello. I'm here to apply for this program." I walked forward to the boy and raised the flyer so that he could see it.

He made me wait a few uncomfortable moments before he raised his head. He ignored the flyer and his hazel eyes studied me instead. Awkwardly, I placed the flyer on the desk. He glanced over my head. "Cutting it pretty close, aren't you?"

I looked behind me and saw a large clock over the door. I was one minute away from the end-time stated on the flyer. I turned back to him and didn't know what to say. Did he want me to leave? My expression must have conveyed my question because he sighed heavily.

He pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "Follow me," he said as he stepped away from his desk. He moved quickly, and I had to double-step to keep pace with him. We rushed through the hallway, passing almost a dozen closed doors. In our hurry, I didn't have the chance to read each name plate.

I nearly crashed into him when he came to an abrupt stop at a

door where the hallway curved. He pushed it open and I followed him inside to see a room with chairs pushed back against the walls. Three seated people looked up at us, curiosity clear on their faces. They all looked to be my age, so they were probably there for the same reason I was. On my right, a woman sat at the counter peering at paperwork, her pen tapping against her mouth. We were obviously in a waiting area of some kind.

"What's your name?" my guide asked me.

"Vanessa Garcia," I said.

"Have a seat. They'll call you when they're ready," he said.

He walked to the woman at the counter. They exchanged words, he pointed at me and she gave me a disapproving frown. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but it was clear that she was unhappy with my late arrival. I sat in the nearest empty chair which happened to be next to a girl with short purple and blue hair. She openly appraised me while the other applicants only snuck glances.

"Fill out this application and return it to her when you're ready." The boy had returned with sheets of papers on a clipboard and a pen. He gave me one last glance and left.

I began filling the form out. The girl next to me said, "They have some funny questions on there."

I skimmed the application form and thought I saw the ones she meant:

Do you like magic?

Do you believe in the supernatural?

"What is this program about? Do you know?" I asked her.

"Not really, but a friend of mine recommended I apply. She got in last year and said it's worth it." She stuck out her hand. "I heard you tell him you're Vanessa. I'm Maribel."

I put my pen down and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you. Have you been waiting here long?"

She twisted her lips in a wry smile. "Depends on what you mean by long. It's been half an hour by my count. If my friend hadn't threatened me if I ditched this opportunity, I would have left already. I hate waiting."

"What did she tell you about the program?" I asked.

"She said it would change my life." Maribel tucked a strand of her short hair behind her ear. "Things were getting boring, so I decided to listen to her."

I tapped on the form. "Why do they ask if we can commit full-time to the program?"

"Once you're accepted, you live here at the Center."

My eyebrows knit together. "Here?"

She shrugged. "I'm not so sure where, but my friend said it's kind of

like a boarding school except you can see your parents over the weekend. I'm fighting so much with mine, I thought it would be a great chance to escape."

It looked like Maribel and I had something in common. I gave her a smile and returned to filling out the form. I did as the boy requested and gave it to the woman at the counter when I finished. She didn't so much as look at me when she grabbed the sheet.

As soon as I returned to my seat, the woman called out, "Maribel, you're next. Go on in."

"Good luck," I told the girl as she stood.

She gave me a lopsided grin. "You too."

I watched her make her way into the room. Then there were three of us. I looked at the two other applicants. The boy was slouched in his seat, his long legs splayed out in front of him. His fingers were steepled together against his lips and he appeared lost in thought. The girl had her arms crossed and looked angry. I wondered how long she had been waiting.

Within half an hour both of them had disappeared through the door. Maribel had never come out, so I assumed that there was another exit within the room.

"Vanessa," a voice called, snapping me out of my reverie. I looked up to see the woman pointing at the door. She kept her head down, still intent on paperwork.

I got to my feet and crossed the room. As soon as I stepped through the door, I realized this was a mistake: I hadn't prepared. I'd come here on a whim.

"Hello," a man greeted me. He was one of three people sitting behind a long table. The man smiled and gestured to the empty chair across from where they sat. The two women looked bored.

I slipped into the seat.

"Vanessa, is it?" He waited until I nodded and continued. "Let's get straight to the point. Why did you apply for this program?"

"I thought it sounded interesting."

He tilted his head. "Which part?"

"To be honest, I liked the dragon part. I love dragons and that's what the flyer asked for."

The women exchanged glances. My heart sank as I realized I wasn't making the best impression. My foot came to life and began tapping on the floor.

"How old are you?" the lighter-haired woman asked.

"Seventeen." Almost. It would be true in five months.

"Are you a Barcelona resident?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been living here?" she continued.

"A month."

"A month?" A thin eyebrow rose.

My throat felt dry. I licked my bottom lip. "Yes, I just moved here."

"Where were you living before?" the other woman asked.

"I grew up in a town just outside Malaga."

"Do you plan on living in Barcelona for the next ten years?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe?" I fidgeted in my seat. I barely knew what I was going to do in the next year. How would I know where I would be living for the next ten years?

The light-haired woman frowned. She turned to her colleagues then back to me. "Thank you for coming in to see us. Unfortunately, it appears that we're unable to enroll you in the program."

"Uh, thank you." I stood up from my chair. I gave them a nod and stumbled out of the room.

I couldn't help but feel that I had lost the chance to be involved in something extraordinary.

And I hated myself for messing it up just like I always messed up everything.

Chapter 3

"What are you moping about?" my stepmother asked me.

"Nothing." It wasn't exactly true. I was still upset with myself for messing up the interview the day before. The more I thought about it, the more upset I became. I could have had the chance to escape and live away from my family. I loved my family and all, but whenever I was around them I just wanted to be away from them. It made me feel guilty to be around them when my mother was alone and far away. I felt like I was betraying her by spending time around them.

My stepmother scoffed at me. "Go take a walk and change your energy. Your aura is particularly negative at the moment." She walked over to the coffee table and picked up a small bottle.

My father was sitting in his armchair watching the news. "Use the floral one. The incense one makes my head hurt."

She returned the small bottle she had picked up and reached for another.

"My aura is fine," I said as she approached me.

"No, it's not." She spritzed the fragrance around me.

I sneezed as the smell of tuberose reached my nose. My stepmother was a big fan of aura cleansers. She got a new one every week or so. They didn't seem to do much except for making me sneeze.

She put the bottle away and said over her shoulder, "Stop moping and go get some fresh air. A walk would restore your balance."

I kept myself from rolling my eyes. I sensed my father watching us and things were already rocky enough with my stepmother. I didn't need more lectures in my life about how I had to be respectful and a good role model to my brothers.

I'd known since I was young that my family wasn't like others. The only thing that I had in common with my half-brothers, other than the same father, was that we had kooky mothers. I remembered shards of my life when my parents had been together, and things were peaceful. Our family had become turbulent when my mother went to the mental facility. My father did his best to take care of me after that, but he simply wasn't a nurturer.

He remarried soon after, but I always felt separated from my "new" family. I loved my half-brothers, and my stepmother was okay, but I never *really* felt like I belonged. Part of the time I wondered if I would inherit my mother's madness and end up locked away. I swear sometimes I could feel my father thinking the same thing when he

looked at me.

His second wife was chipper and always prattled on about positive energy and forces. His first wife, my mother, used to talk about hidden elements and opening your eyes to reality. Clearly, my father had a type.

I left the apartment and began walking the streets of Barcelona once more, my thoughts still with my family situation. It would have been great to get some space away from them, but I hadn't been accepted into the program. The more I turned the interview questions over in my head, the more I came up with better responses I should have said. It was frustrating. Before I knew it, I found my feet taking me back to the Center.

As I looked up at the stunning building again, I realized I could use the opportunity to study the gargoyles more carefully. I hadn't had time yesterday to see the Center completely, so I decided to walk around it. The building seemed to be five stories high. There were beautiful balconies along the upper windows. I raised my eyes to the roof and admired the intricate gargoyles. They peered down at me. A shiver ran up my spine. It almost felt like they were really watching me. I wondered how many people they had seen pass this building and the stories they could tell.

"Stop it."

I lowered my head and followed the voice. To my left, four people my age — two boys and two girls — surrounded a younger boy. He glared at the older ones. His hands were wrapped into fists and his jaw was set in a stubborn line.

One of the taller boys laughed. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Are you really threatening me?" the younger boy demanded. He raised his chin.

"What if I am?" His tormentor gave him a slow smile, clearly getting a thrill from riling up the younger one.

"All four of you had better be ready if you're taking me on." I admired the younger kid's bravery.

"Really? You'd challenge us alone?" The older one smirked. It was a smirk that said he was looking forward to wiping the floor with his opponent.

I stepped forward. "He won't be alone."

All of them turned toward me. The look on their faces would have made me laugh if I wasn't priming for a fight.

One of the girls frowned. "Who are you?"

"Someone that doesn't like bullies." I took another step forward, my hands balling into fists.

I had taken self-defense classes at my mother's insistence. She

made me show her my moves each time I visited her to prove that I knew what I was doing. The doctors thought she had taken the her "lessons" too far when she tried to stab me one time. I took even more classes after that incident.

The girl looked confused. She glanced at the boy I was defending. "Is she a friend of yours?"

I couldn't read his expression. It was a blend of confusion, curiosity, and something else. Then his gaze turned fierce. "You're willing to fight these four alongside me?"

"Yes," I said.

"Why? You don't even know me." His head was tilted to the side, waiting for my reply. His gaze was so intent I feared I would disappoint him with my answer.

"Like I said, I don't like bullies."

Silence met my reply. He raised his head as if smelling the air. He gave me a nod, satisfied.

"You heard the lady," he said to the others. "Move aside."

The four looked at each other. One of the girls took a step toward the boy and I moved to block her.

The girl looked at me. She was at eye level with me. "You're making a mistake. You don't know what you're getting involved in," she said.

I stood my ground. "I see four people against a youngster. I think it's pretty clear which side I should be on."

She threw her head back and laughed. I blinked in surprise. That wasn't the reaction I had expected. She peered around me at the boy. "We'll talk later. Come on," she instructed her friends. Without another word, she turned on her heels and left with the other three bullies in tow.

I breathed a sigh of relief as the adrenaline left my body. I wouldn't have to fight after all. I watched them walk away. The girls didn't look back at me, but the boys threw me an appraising look as they left.

"So, do you act the role of protector often?"

I turned around. The boy waited for my answer.

"No, but I couldn't let them hurt you."

He smiled. "They wouldn't hurt me."

"It didn't look that way to me."

The boy's smile widened. "No, I guess it didn't. My name's Christopher." He offered me his hand.

I shook it. "I'm Vanessa."

"What are you doing here, Vanessa? What twist of fate caused you to be my savior today?"

"I came by yesterday for an interview, but I didn't get a chance to

study the gargoyles while I was here. So I came back to see them."

He frowned. "Is there a reason you're interested in these specific gargoyles?"

"I love the gargoyles in the city," I explained. "They're so diverse. I take photographs of the ones I've seen and add them to my collection. I've never seen so many dragon gargoyles in one place, but I guess it makes sense since it's the Dragon Research and Authority Center. They're magical." I sputtered to a halt as I realized I was rambling.

He smiled. "Do you believe in magic?"

"Sometimes." Sometimes I wish it existed so I could escape.

"Do you think the gargoyles move?"

"It would be magical if they did." I chuckled, indulging in this boy's fantasies of moving gargoyles.

"Why did you apply for the program yesterday?" His eyes sparkled with interest. "And how did you find out about it? I'm always curious about that."

"I thought it was fate. A block of stone nearly crushed me the other day, and I only saw the flyer because I ducked it." I shrugged. "But I was wrong. It wasn't meant to be."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," he muttered. His voice was so low he probably thought I hadn't heard him.

"Come on," he said and walked toward the doors of the Center.

I stood rooted to the spot. He looked over his shoulder and stopped. "What are you waiting for?"

My feet started moving. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see." Christopher threw me a wide grin and resumed walking.

He took me through a maze of hallways until we arrived at a door and I followed him in. I recognized the room I was interviewed in. This was a separate entrance. The same three people were still sitting at the table. They lifted their heads at our entrance.

The light-haired woman stood up. "Christopher, what brings you here?"

"I want this girl admitted to the DRAC outreach program."

"You want her to be a DRIP participant?" The woman frowned. "She was rejected yesterday."

"For what reasons?"

"Insufficient use," she stated.

"In what manner?"

"Lacks direction. Unknown value in the future. Indecisive about residency."

"I told you I lived here," I protested.

The woman gave a half-shrug. "But you didn't know where you're going."

"I'm a teenager," I said defensively.

"That's no excuse." She sniffed.

I sputtered speechlessly.

"Enroll her," Christopher interrupted our exchange.

"But the final twelve have already been selected and informed." The light-haired woman threw me an annoyed glance. Clearly, I was creating more work for her.

Christopher shrugged. "So it will be a class of thirteen this year."

"It's never been done," the woman protested. "What makes her so special?"

"She demonstrated bravery and inner strength. Enroll her, Isidora Don't make me say it a third time."

The woman's head lowered in what appeared to be a bow. "Yes, sir."

Confused, I looked between the two of them. I couldn't understand why the older woman had deferred to Christopher with such respect, almost as if he was her superior. He gave me a wink and said, "Every dragon needs a knight. You're mine."

A gasp, quickly muffled, escaped from one of the others in the room.

His smile grew wider. He seemed amused that he had shocked them. I wasn't sure why. He asked Isidora, "What time should she be here tomorrow?"

"Nine in the morning," she said, her tone resigned.

"Perfect. Prepare her introductory packet and materials and I'll bring her back to pick them up." Christopher turned to me. "Come with me and I'll give you a tour of the place. We've got some cool gargoyles out in the courtyard. You'll love them."

And just like that, I was part of the program.

Chapter 4

I showed up at the Dragon Research and Authority Center at nine in the morning as requested.

Yesterday was a whirlwind. I was given a contract for my father to sign. It had taken some cajoling, but after I had shown him a website showcasing previous Dragon Research Initiate Program participants, his attitude softened noticeably. All of the past participants featured on the webpage were highly successful. I didn't blame my father for his reluctance really. It must have sounded crazy to him, the idea that I was going to be studying in a boarding school he knew nothing about. With the website listing all the alumni, he had to admit that the education was clearly superior than what I would otherwise receive anywhere else. I told him tuition and board were covered by the program, it was free education. He relented when I told him I would be able to see the family on the weekends, and he finally signed the paperwork.

I was free.

The introductory packet was lean, only a few papers stating that we'd find out more about the program once we began. It didn't mention a probation period, but I was determined not to mess up this time, probation period or not.

I was in the waiting room again. This time twelve others were seated with me. I smiled at Maribel. She gave me a lopsided grin. She didn't need to know I was a fluke participant because of Christopher's influence. The mystery of his power still intrigued me. I would have to look into that.

Some of the others talked to each other nervously, but the excitement in the air was palpable. None of us knew what was in store. I glanced around the room and realized there were seven boys and five girls. Without my inclusion in the program the numbers would have been an even dozen.

The man from the interview stepped out. He counted us all. He nodded to himself and began speaking. "My name's Guillen and I'm going to be your instructor for the duration of the program. Congratulations on being accepted into the Dragon Research Initiate Program. As a participant, you join the ranks of a privileged few. The Dragon Research and Authority Center is committed to a partnership with you and will be an asset to your educational and professional life. Previous participants have benefited greatly from the program.

You would do well to make the most of it."

He paused. His brown eyes looked across our group. "Today will be an orientation day. You're going to be getting a lot of information at once. Some of it may feel overwhelming. If you need to talk, I'm available to converse. You're also to come to me with any questions you might have. You will be shown your living accommodations when we return. Your luggage has already been taken there.

"Does everyone have a copy of their schedule?" A chorus of yeses met his question.

"From this moment on," he continued, "You're expected to show up at every event mentioned on the schedule. Failure to show up means expulsion from the program. No excuses."

To my left, a boy with dark hair raised his hand. "I have a clash on the twentieth of the month. I won't be able to be here."

"You're dismissed." Guillen gestured to the woman behind the counter. "Kindly leave your copy of the schedule and handbook with Paola."

The boy blinked. "But..."

Guillen didn't wait for the boy's explanation. "No exceptions. We don't have much time, so I'd appreciate you moving quickly."

The only sound in the room was that of the boy getting up from his seat and following Guillen's instructions. We all watched as he solemnly handed his items over to Paola. He looked at Guillen in stunned disbelief as if waiting for him to reconsider, but Guillen wasn't looking at him. The boy turned away, his shoulders slumped. I couldn't bear to watch him as he left the room, choosing to stare at my sneakers instead.

Guillen spoke as soon as the door closed behind the boy. "Does anyone else have a conflict? I'd rather you leave now instead of further down the line. The only exit option after today is death. Understood?"

Death? I raised my head quickly. Guillen's expression was stoic. With a sinking feeling I realized that he meant every word. What kind of program was this? I snuck a glance at the others and saw that most of them appeared as shaken as I was. I waited with growing apprehension for Guillen to continue.

"No one else? Alright then." He smiled at me, a sharp line that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Well, look at that. It appears I'll have a class of twelve after all. I do so like an even number."

I felt my face flush as the others turned to stare at me.

"Let's find out what everyone's called," Guillen continued. "Go ahead. What's your name?" he prompted me.

"I'm Vanessa," I said. Guillen's gaze shifted to the boy on my left. Everyone stated their names in quick succession.

"I'm Kevin."

"Elena."

"Iris."

"Quentin."

"Jordi."

"I'm Oliver."

"Maribel."

"I'm Pol." Pol had a mess of curly hair and a lazy grin. I grinned back.

"Franco here."

"Beatriz."

"I'm Leire Gomez. My father is Ramón Gomez." Leire had an upturned nose which gave her a haughty appearance. She arched an eyebrow in a challenge, but Guillen's face was impassive. He clearly didn't care who her father was. The girl sitting next to Leire, Beatriz, rolled her eyes. I hid a smile.

"All twelve of you will accompany me to get your charmstone amulets. Let's head out." Guillen led the way and the rest of us followed him.

Chapter 5

The sun was bright outside. Birds were chirping happily and there was a slight breeze. I took a deep breath, taking in the smell of grass. It felt good to be out in the open air. We followed Guillen as he made his way down the main streets and narrow inner streets. We squeezed through a tight alley that opened up to a wider one. I glanced around me in wonder. I'd thought I'd explored every corner of the El Born district, but I had never been here.

Guillen paused at the entrance of a store and his eyes roamed over us as if counting to make sure we were all there. We stood in front of a large window-display showcasing beautiful jewelry designs. Elegant gold script on the sign above the door declared it *Karam Jewelry*. Guillen pushed open the door and we followed him in. The store was spacious enough to fit fifty of us but felt cozy nonetheless. In the center of the room was a dark wood and glass display-case exhibiting gorgeous pieces. The light from the large windows made the jewelry inside sparkle where it caught on diamonds and gemstones.

"This is Dina," Guillen said. "She owns *Karam Jewelry*. As part of the program, you will be given one charmstone amulet. Select a piece of jewelry and Dina will customize it for you by adding a charmstone." The jeweler displayed a red gemstone between her forefinger and her thumb. She moved her hand and it looked like there was a small fire within the stone.

Guillen continued, "The Center will pay for your charmstone amulets. You're required to wear yours at all times, day and night. Look around the store and choose wisely. You can select one item but make sure it's something that you're comfortable wearing daily."

Leire spoke up. "Anything?"

"Anything." Guillen bared his teeth. It may have been an attempt at a smile.

A lanky boy with brown hair said, "I don't wear jewelry."

"She has a nice selection of badges, pins, and cufflinks. I'd caution against the cufflinks. Difficult to wear when you're in a t-shirt. Go ahead and look around. You have thirty minutes to make your selection."

Leire moved quickly to the center of the store toward the large glass display-case. The others drifted off in different directions.

The girl next to me snorted. "Trust her to seek out the more expensive items."

I looked at her. It was the same girl who had rolled her eyes when Leire introduced herself earlier: Beatriz. "Do you know her?" I asked.

She made a face. "She's a family friend. We've known each other since we were young. She can be a bit much. I'm Beatriz. What's your name again?"

"Vanessa," I said.

"You're new to Barcelona." It didn't sound like a question.

"Yes, how did you know?"

Beatriz eyed me critically. "There's something different about you. I can't figure it out, but you stand out. Everyone else moves a certain way. I can't really explain it." She nodded toward the rest of our group, all of them spread across the store. "Let's go select our amulets before they're all gone."

Beatriz moved to the shelf to her right and I followed her. The store had several cabinets carved out of the same brown wood as the display-case in the center of the store. The cabinets beautifully complemented the jewelry. The cabinet we stood at had rows of rings. Gold, rose-gold, and silver rings with modern designs. Beatriz bit her lip as she studied them one-by-one. She glanced up at me. "See anything you like?"

"Not really." I held up my hands. "I'm not much of a ring person."

She tilted her head. "Earrings? Necklace? Anklet?"

My hand rose to the thin gold choker around my neck. "Maybe something to match this?"

Beatriz moved down the rows of glass cases as I followed in a more leisurely manner. She called to me and pointed at one. "This might work. It suits you."

I made my way to her and looked down at the item she was pointing at. It looked like a round gold coin stamped with a dragon in flight. Above the dragon was a crescent and a star. The star had a diamond in the center. It was beautiful. It was also insanely expensive from the eye-watering price tag.

"I feel like it would be wrong to replace the diamond with a charmstone," I murmured to Beatriz.

"I can rework the piece so that it's a crescent and sun. The charmstone will be in the center of the sun," a voice said from over my shoulder. "Try it on."

The designer unlocked the case and took the pendant out. She offered to put it around my neck and I turned around. I felt the gold chain as it fell to the hollow in my neck. It was the perfect length and it didn't feel heavy. I could definitely wear this piece day and night if I had to. I looked in the mirror and loved how it looked.

Dina watched me twist and turn. She gave me a warm smile. "What do you think?"

"Crescent and sun?" My voice was doubtful.

"Trust me, I'll make it work. You'll love it."

"But the price..." My voice trailed off as Beatriz elbowed me. I realized I was telling the designer that her work was too expensive. I snapped my mouth shut, embarrassed by my tactlessness.

She winked at me. "Don't worry about the price. The Center are great clients and get a generous discount in return. Dragons are picky about giving away their gold. Shall I write it down?" Dina asked me, pen and paper in hand.

"Yes, please." I took the pendant off and placed it face-up on the case.

"What's your name?"

"Vanessa Garcia."

She lifted the paper and scanned the roster, writing down my selection once she found my name. Dina smiled at me. "I'm sure you'll love the end product. Please excuse me, I need to go help the others." She left us to attend to Leire who stood with her arms crossed and her face set in a sulky expression. I watched for a few minutes as she argued with the designer. I wondered if Leire was having a bad day or if she was always like this.

"See? I told you it's okay. Let me go find mine." Beatriz beamed.

"Selected your item?" Guillen appeared by my side.

"Yes, this pendant." I pointed at it. The more I stared at it, the more I loved the piece. The shape and size reminded me of a coin from ancient Greece. It would be fitting to have a mythological creature stamped on it.

Guillen peered at the necklace. "This one with the dragon? Not subtle, are you? Go ahead and wait with the others that have finished choosing."

We waited as the remaining four participants continued to search for their talismans. I listened to the two boys in front of me discuss the merits of choosing a bracelet versus a ring and watched Beatriz move from display-case to display-case. Leire was now arguing with Guillen, her voice raised. It seemed that she wanted to buy the most expensive item in the store regardless of how practical it was. Guillen's expression was difficult to read. I wished briefly that she had been the one with the scheduling conflict.

The others had chosen earrings, pins, bracelets, anklets, and rings. Only three of us had selected necklaces.

"Why do you think they're making us get charmstone amulets?" one of the boys asked.

"They're probably going to use them to track us," Maribel replied. She tucked a strand of purple hair behind her ear. She had opted for stud earrings.

"Why would they track us?" a blonde girl frowned.

Maribel shrugged. "Why did he tell us we had to keep them on day and night? It's strange, isn't it?"

The others muttered in agreement. We had no idea what the charmstone amulets were for, but in the end, everyone was happy because we were getting something pretty.

Or we *would* be if Leire ever made up her mind.

Chapter 6

After everyone had selected their charmstone amulets, we left the store and followed Guillen as he gave us a tour of the area. He made sure to stop and point out specific businesses here and there.

"Do you know why we're doing this?" Maribel inquired of the boy next to her. He shrugged in response.

It seemed I wasn't the only one wondering what the point of the tour was. After an hour and a half, we found ourselves back in front of *Karam Jewelry*. We filed in and Dina called out our names as she handed us our personalized charmstone amulets.

Beatriz gasped when she saw hers. She had selected a silver ring which had originally displayed an opal surrounded by small diamonds. A brilliant red charmstone now rested where the opal once lay. The gem reminded me of a tiger-eye stone in the way it seemed to shift wherever the light touched it. It was uncanny how much the red and orange within the stone resembled flames, almost as if Beatriz was holding a tiny fire in her hands.

Dina continued to hand out our amulets. We thanked her as we received them and were all pleased with our designs. She had been right about replacing the star with a sun in my pendant. It looked stunning, and I loved it.

"Thank you, Dina, for your hard work," Guillen said once all of us had our various pieces.

"It was my pleasure. I hope you all love your new amulets. Wear them well." Dina beamed at us.

Guillen led us out of the store and we followed him like ducklings following their mother. To anyone who saw us, we simply looked like students on a field trip.

"Take off your items," Guillen said. He waited until all of us had complied with his request. He pulled out a small velvet bag from his pocket. "Give them to me."

We exchanged confused looks and moved forward to give them to him. He placed each amulet into the bag. "Alright, let's keep moving."

We followed him down the street until he came to a halt. The crowd was bustling around us as people made their way to work or ran their errands. A few tourists lingered to take pictures of the architecture, but the big groups hadn't emerged yet.

"Look across the street. What do you see?" he asked us.

My eyes took in the stores around us. We were in the same area

where he had brought us earlier for our tour. He seemed obsessed with this place.

"A closed antique store," Quentin spoke up.

"A hobby store," Elena said.

"A pawn shop," Kevin added.

Guillen seemed pleased at the difference in responses he received. "Take back your charmstone amulets and put them on."

I waited my turn as the others ahead of me took theirs. Gasps emitted from the group as each of my peers put their respective amulets on. I quickly slipped my necklace back on and blinked. Around me the others continued to exclaim. Across the street from us was a store that hadn't been there a moment before. A large sign read *Magic Runes*.

When we quieted down, Guillen explained what had just happened. "Your tokens allow you to slip into a world previously hidden from you. Keep your tokens on and you'll see what we see. Look around you."

"*We*?" Beatriz repeated. We exchanged glances. I was still wondering what kind of trick Guillen had just pulled to make it seem as though a store appeared out of thin air.

Guillen didn't respond. Instead, he walked determinedly through the streets and we followed. A few people noted our group as they sat on their balconies, but nobody gave us a second glance. We walked down narrow streets and passed colorful buildings with peeling paint. There was some beautiful graffiti in this area. I always appreciated great art.

Suddenly I heard someone gasp. I turned to my right to see Beatriz with her eyes lit up. "Is that what I think it is?"

I followed her gaze and saw a tall creature walking toward us. I had been so distracted by the graffiti on the wall that I hadn't noticed it. I stared at it entranced. It almost looked like a tree. “What is it?” I hissed at Beatriz.

“I think it’s a dryad,” she replied. The rest of the group gaped as the creature moved past us.

As if the spell was broken once the creature walked past us, the group continued to move forward. Guillen had not paused for these reactions. We jogged to reach him. He turned down a side street. As we passed a bakery, I blinked. The bakers' ears were pointed. Other than that, they looked entirely normal. I knew that this was another image we wouldn't have seen without our amulets. Before I could give the bakery another look, we had already passed the sweet-smelling shop.

A little way on the street opened again at the mouth of an alley. There was a single piece of graffiti on the building's corner. Guillen

stopped at the graffiti and turned to face us. "Okay, so you may have noticed the effects of the charmstone amulets already." He looked at Beatriz. "The charmstone amulets give you the power to see magical things that are otherwise invisible to non-magical humans like yourselves. A hidden world, if you will."

A storm of whispers and questions broke out among us.

"Magical things?"

"Hidden world?"

"Was that a walking tree I saw?"

Guillen continued talking over the questions. "If you take off your amulet, you won't be able to see the hidden world. Charmstones are regulated, so it's important for you to keep track of yours. If you lose it, you are to notify us immediately. Do you understand?"

A chorus of yeses met his question.

Guillen went on. "I know many of you are excited to have been admitted into the program, and many of you chose to blindly trust the Center with your care and well-being. We appreciate your confidence in us and we'll honor it. That's what we do as dragons."

"Dragons?" The word echoed among the group. My mind was racing. Suddenly the questions on the flyer made sense. I recalled my conversation with Christopher. He was young but in charge. He was a dragon.

"Dragons," Guillen repeated, quieting the group. "The Dragon Research and Authority Center, DRAC for short, is the leading authority in Barcelona and the surrounding areas. We follow Diego, the leader of the dragon shifters and other shifters living within his jurisdiction. As Dragon Research Initiate Program participants, you're also under his authority and protection."

A lone hand raised into the air.

"Yes?" Guillen called on Kevin.

"Dragon shifters?" he asked.

"People that can shift into dragons and vice versa."

"Are you one of them?" Kevin swallowed hard.

"Yes," Guillen affirmed.

A hush fell over the group. We stared at our instructor who had just revealed he was a supernatural creature, and a *dragon* at that. "Any other questions? Or may I continue? Alright then, it is my duty to inform you that despite the fact that you fall under DRAC's protection, you still need to exercise caution. You will need to be aware of your surroundings." He pointed to the graffiti on the building. "Can anyone tell me what this means?"

I exchanged a puzzled look with Beatriz. She shrugged. Everyone else looked just as perplexed as we did.

Guillen explained. "We dragons control the city and the outer

areas. However, we as supernaturals have different areas that we frequent. As participants in DRIP, you have a certain status within the community. This, however, means that many still look at you as merely humans. It is your job to be on your guard and aware of your surroundings at all times for your own safety." He pointed to the graffiti once more. "Pay attention to the streets you walk on. This mark here denotes that the cat shifters frequent this street."

"Does that mean we can't walk here?" Leire asked.

He shook his head. "No. However, if you walked here and caused them offense, it would be a different matter."

"So why do we need to know which supernaturals frequent this street?" a voice asked from the back.

Guillen replied, "Because these are markers. You know from human media that shifters and vampires do not have the best relationship. This is true and may indeed be an understatement in some cases. Tagging the walls indicates safety or danger. It's a way to avoid trouble."

"But if the dragons rule, then shouldn't there be dragon graffiti everywhere?" Leire asked.

His eyes bore into Leire. "Our mark is everywhere."

"The gargoyles," I whispered. All the dragon gargoyles I had seen across Barcelona suddenly made sense. When I had researched them on the internet, the explanation I had found was that local lore and culture heavily focused on Sant Jordi, the patron saint of Catalonia, and his famous victory over a tyrant dragon. The gargoyles were meant to honor his triumph. As a person who enjoyed mythology, I liked the legend, but this new explanation made more sense.

Guillen turned to me. This time his smile reached his eyes. "Indeed."

I turned to smile at Beatriz and saw Leire's angry scowl. Someone didn't like to have the spotlight taken away from her.

Guillen smiled at us. "You won't be able to understand the spell-work involved, but this is an example of how important your charmstone amulets are. They will allow you to see what we see, see the dangers we see. Use them well and remember to report at once if you lose them. Now follow me and I'll show you some more wonders."

We exited the alley and headed toward the store called *Magic Runes*.

Chapter 7

I smelled cloves, cinnamon, and lavender as we entered the small shop. It wasn't a bad smell, but it was an interesting combination of scents.

The inside of the store was tidy and organized. It was more spacious than it appeared from the exterior. I wondered if that had to do with magic as well. We all waited for Guillen to speak. A young woman with dark hair stood behind a counter, giving us an amused smile. I wondered how often Guillen had shown up with a group with shell-shocked expressions on their faces after he turned their lives upside-down.

"Everyone, meet Carmen. She is the owner of this store. Can anyone guess what type of supernatural Carmen is?" Guillen finally said.

"A witch, obviously." Leire smirked. She clearly meant her tone to cause offense to the store owner.

"Yes," Carmen replied. "I am. I see you all got your charmstone amulets. Dina is a friend of mine. She makes the best jewelry. Be sure to take care of your piece and remember to report it at once if you lose it." She gave Guillen a half-smile. It seemed to be an inside joke between the two of them.

Guillen waved around the store. "Take a look around and familiarize yourself with what can be found in such a store." Before we could disperse, the bell over the door jingled behind us. I turned around but couldn't see anything except for an empty open door.

Suddenly the air shimmered and a gargoyle appeared in front of us.

I jumped.

The gargoyle made a grating sound which I realized was chuckling.

"Mateu, you shouldn't just appear like that. You scared them," Carmen reproached him.

The gargoyle shook like a dog shaking off water. I watched in fascination as his body moved, wondering what kind of magic could make stone move so fluidly. He sat on his haunches. His face and body were a strange combination of animals. It was as if the sculptor couldn't decide what exactly he was sculpting. I couldn't help but thinking that something about the gargoyle was familiar.

I frowned. "I know you. You sit over the bridge at the Barcelona Cathedral. You usually have your tongue sticking out."

The gargoyle laughed. "You've got an observant one in your clutch," Mateu told Guillen. "You need more people like that."

"Do all gargoyles move like you?" I asked him.

"Most gargoyles can move, but some have chosen to hibernate and remain frozen. You won't be able to tell which ones they are, so whenever you're around them you can be sure that there are always eyes watching you." Mateu winked at me.

Guillen said, "The gargoyles are our great allies. They provide a vital information network to the Dragon Research and Authority Center."

"They report to DRAC?" Leire asked.

"No," the gargoyle replied, his tone sharp. "We're not DRIPs."

"Mateu," Carmen reprimanded him from the back.

I wondered what a drip was. Kevin asked aloud. Guillen answered this time. "Dragon Research Initiate Program participant. DRIP." He waved around at the store again. "Okay, that's enough about gargoyles. Take a look around, but don't touch anything. You break it and you may just get cursed." Guillen walked over to a sitting area with two armchairs. Carmen disappeared into a backroom.

The group dispersed. Beatriz headed toward a large bookshelf. Leire started browsing the counter where there were jewelry pieces on display. The others wandered around the store taking stock of what was available.

The gargoyle made his way to a window seat and sat down. After a moment of hesitation, I followed him.

"Were you there when the stones nearly crushed me?" I asked. I had the nagging suspicion it hadn’t been an accident.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." He arched an eyebrow, a small smug smile on his face. "How is the program going so far?"

"It's amazing. I can't believe this has been around me this whole time. I wish I had learned of it sooner. I wish I had magic."

Mateu shook his head. "You don't want to wish for that. The second they find out you have magic you'd be kicked out of the program."

"Why?"

"No witches or supernaturals are allowed to be DRIPs. Only humans."

"Do you know why that is?" I asked.

"The whole point of the program is to build a network of humans. Gargoyles serve as information centers. You serve as human liaisons."

"For what purpose?"

Mateu sighed. "Supernaturals live really long lives. They need somebody on the inside to set them up with legitimate identification, bank accounts, and other legalities. They train you to be the best so

that you can grow up to be a more useful asset to them. Take my advice and be successful. Be a successful lawyer, be a great politician and change laws, do whatever. Just be successful."

I hadn't given a lot of thought to my purpose in the program. Clearly there had to be some motive behind what the dragons were doing with us. My hands clutched the pendant around neck.

Mateu's eyes followed my movement. "That around your neck cost a pretty penny. Why would they spend all that on you, several of you? They know it's a small investment compared to what you can grant them later."

"It seems like a fair exchange for what they're giving me."

"Is it fair of them to keep you all in debt forever?"

I chewed my bottom lip.

Mateu nodded. "Think on that. Remember, nothing in life is ever free."

Chapter 8

After our visit to Carmen's store, Guillen took us back to the Center. We ate in the cafeteria which was empty except for us. During our meal, Guillen explained that we could get food at any hour. When we finished eating, the excitement set in again; everyone was eager to find out what else we would learn. When Guillen declared lunch to be over, we all rushed to follow him to our next lesson. He handed us over to another instructor, Isidora, the light-haired woman from my interview.

"Everyone, listen up," Guillen said. "From now onwards you will be taking specialized courses in addition to your standard classes. You'll be taking Enemy Combat and Self-Defense to learn how to efficiently repel attacking supernaturals. You'll also be taking Leadership Basics, Treasure Hunting, and Identifying Opportunities and Community Dynamics. Lastly, you will be taking Dragon Fundamentals. Your regular classes will be from nine in the morning to three in the afternoon, then we will break for lunch. You will recommence from five to eight in the evening. Your time after that is your own. You may remain in the Center or leave, however, note that anyone arriving after eleven at night will be locked out. No exceptions. Is that clear?" Guillen waited for our affirmations and then left the room.

Isidora studied us all. "I recommend that you continuously work at excelling yourself."

"I signed up for more schoolwork?" a boy behind me said.

She turned to the boy. "Yes, but you will be getting a far superior education, and upon leaving the program you'll have DRAC resources on your side. We expect excellence. Again, time after eight in the evening is yours. On weekends, you may choose to return home or remain at DRAC. Please note that we fully invoke the nondisclosure agreement that you signed. You may not reveal any knowledge gleaned from within these walls or anything relating to the program. Failing to comply can result in death."

At this she raised her hand and we watched in horrified fascination as her fingers transformed into claws. She made sure to look each one of us in the eye and said, "I have no qualms with killing you. Do not mistake my tolerance for friendship. My role is to keep DRAC secrets safe, and if that means getting rid of you, so be it." Her claws retracted, and she smiled menacingly at us.

More and more I was beginning to second-guess my decision to

enroll in this program. Seeing the hidden supernatural world was an incredible gift, but was it worth the risk?

"I'll be showing you to your wing." Isidora turned and we followed.

Beatriz walked up to me with Pol by her side. We continued down the hall side-by-side.

"Are you guys as tired of speeches as I am?" I asked them.

"That was amazing." Pol's fingers formed an imitation of a claw.

I laughed. "Amazing that we might all be killed?"

"Follow the rules. Don't tell anyone." Pol smiled his lazy smile. "Seems pretty simple."

"Think about how big these secrets are. How strange is it that we're able to see all this but none of our family can?" Beatriz asked.

"We're special," Leire added from behind us. "We're allowed to see things others can't." She shoved Beatriz out of the way in her hurry to catch up and move to the front of the line.

The Center was a confusing place that was full of interconnected hallways and many closed doors. I wondered if anyone knew what was behind all those doors and who kept the keys. As we walked, I noticed small red triangles on the walls. They pointed in the direction we were moving.

Our instructor took us three floors up and led us to a large door. She stood in front of it, facing us. We waited. I was getting a little tired of these talks.

"You'll find your living quarters within. You may have noticed as we were walking down the hallways the red triangles." She pointed at the ones on the wall behind her. "Those triangles will point the way to your wing. Follow them so that you don't get lost."

Well, that explained it.

"Once you enter, choose a room. There are twelve rooms within, one for each of you. There is one common area. Remember to be respectful when you're sitting there because others may hear you. Your luggage is waiting inside."

"Why is there a big door?" Pol asked.

"It's been sound-proofed and fire-proofed for your protection," Isidora answered. "There's also a study room and a reading space in addition to a television room. Kindly respect each other's spaces. As dragons, we take privacy very seriously and entering someone's room without permission will be punished. You'll find the according punishments listed in the handbook. Each room has a handbook as well as your textbooks. Go through them and we will start tomorrow. You've had a long day, so you'll be dismissed. A meal will be served in the cafeteria. Someone will come and get you to show you the way. Stay in your wing until then."

She pushed open the door and Leire ran in quickly, moving to

opposite end of the floor. Beatriz and I rolled our eyes and followed at a more sedated pace. Some of the others ran ahead, following Leire's example. I chose the room that was next to Beatriz's. It was also as far across the floor from Leire as possible.

I was beginning to think the more distance I had from her, the better my time at DRAC would be.

Chapter 9

The next day we were guided out of our wing and back to the cafeteria. I found myself beginning to differentiate the hallways and creating a map in my head. Seeing the triangles certainly helped. At the door to the cafeteria, our guide told us that we were to report to the room next door within half an hour.

Unlike the night before, this morning the cafeteria was bustling with people. Beatriz and I gave each other wide-eyed looks.

"They're so beautiful," she whispered.

I took in all the different men and women sitting at tables or standing in lines to get their meals. Each person had a tray with food on it and they laughed and ate with gusto. Beatriz was right. They *were* beautiful. Each person seemed to glow with health. Were they all dragon shifters? I looked for Christopher, but I didn't spot him or the other four I had seen him with that day.

A few heads turned our way as we entered. I elbowed Beatriz as I realized we were the only two still standing by the door. "Let's get some food," I said.

We made our way through the packed room to the line. I picked up a tray and gave one to Beatriz. Without thinking I took any and all food offered and piled it on my plate. I was too distracted by the presence of the supernaturals to notice the growing mountain of food on my tray.

A voice behind me laughed. "The new DRIP has quite the appetite, doesn't she?"

I turned toward the voice to see who he was talking about. Deep blue eyes met mine. I looked down at my tray and saw the small mountain of food I had accepted from the cafeteria lady. My face flushed.

"Personally, I think people with a healthy appetite are interesting," his friend said. "It's the ones that refuse to eat that you should be suspicious of." He turned to me and gave me a kind smile.

The two of them represented what I imagined warriors to be. Both were well-formed, muscles evident under their shirts.

"Who's holding up the line?" another voice called.

I felt my face heat up even more as I moved away. In my haste, I stumbled and my tray nearly flew out of my hands. One of the men grabbed it. "Easy there. Don't lose your food mountain."

"Thanks," I mumbled and escaped to the table where Beatriz was

sitting with the rest of our group.

"Who were they?" She gaped at me as I sat down.

"I don't know."

"Do you think one of them is Diego's Enforcer?" Maribel chewed a mouthful of cereal.

"Enforcer?" I asked.

She nodded. "He's apparently Diego's right-hand man. He's the second strongest dragon shifter here."

"Do you think we'll meet Diego?" Beatriz asked.

Quentin laughed. "What would he want to do with us?"

"Isn't there some rule that he has to meet us? Wouldn't he want to know who's roaming around the Center?" Beatriz dug into her food.

"I think he leaves that to the less important people," Quentin said.

At his comment Guillen turned his head. He frowned.

Kevin elbowed Quentin. "They can hear you."

"What?" Quentin knit his eyebrows.

"The dragon shifters. They can hear you. All the shifters have super hearing. Didn't you listen to them yesterday? Why do you think they sound-proofed our area?" Kevin raised his sandwich to his mouth and bit into it.

"I don't know." Quentin shrugged. "I thought they didn't want *us* to hear *them*."

Maribel looked thoughtful. "Do you think they shift into dragons and spit fire?"

"He can hear you," I whispered to her.

Guillen's gaze turned to me. He got to his feet and walked over to us. "Are you all done? It seems like you're more interested in talking than eating. You have five minutes to finish your meals and meet me outside."

We slumped in our seats at the reprimand. We quickly ate and shuffled outside to wait for him.

He led us across the courtyard to another section of the building. He made us file in and said a final, "Behave," before he walked away.

The room was small. Twelve desks with seats were waiting for us. A middle-aged woman sat in a large desk in the corner. She had emerald green eyes and hair the color of cotton candy. She looked up at our entrance. "Wonderful, you're here. Sit so that we can begin." We settled into our seats. "Welcome to Dragon Fundamentals. My name's Carlotta and this is where you'll learn the important stuff. You have each been given a Code of Conduct. You should have found them in your rooms yesterday. Have you all read them? Raise your hand if you have. Be honest."

Three-quarters of the class raised their hands. I was one of them. I always over-prepared.

"Very well. The rest of you be sure to read the codes of conduct especially since it could be a matter of life and death." She gave us a warm smile before continuing. "Some fundamentals about dragons. We are territorial creatures. There are certain places that are off-limits. Disobey and cross into the territory that is not yours and you will be at risk of harm. Your actions have consequences and most dragons kill first and ask questions later. Do you understand me?"

I exchanged a worried glance with Beatriz and Pol.

"There also seems to be a little misunderstanding. The leader of dragon shifters is Diego. He rules over *all* shifters in Barcelona and outer areas, not just dragon shifters. He will be informed of your progress or lack thereof. Any creature under his roof is under his protection and rule. Don't reward his protection with disobedience and mediocrity. Now, do you have any questions for me?"

"Would we be able to ride the dragons?" Kevin asked.

Carlotta scowled. Her voice was fierce. "We are *not* horses for you to ride."

Kevin sank in his seat.

I was thankful that I didn't ask that question. I could tell from Maribel's expression that she had been about to ask the same thing.

Leire spoke up. "Will we ever see a dragon? We keep hearing about dragon shifters, but I haven't seen proof."

I gaped at her nerve. We saw Isidora's hand turn into claws. That move seemed to be a favorite amongst the instructors around here.

Carlotta looked at Leire coolly and turned away as if she hadn't spoken at all. Leire's face burned red; she clearly wasn't used to be ignored.

Beatriz raised her hand. After Carlotta gave her a nod, she asked. "Will we meet Diego?"

Carlotta pressed her finger to her mouth. "That is uncertain. A lot of it will have to do with your progress in your studies. Now, pay close attention to what I'm about to tell you."

The instructor gave us the history of how dragon shifters had settled here in Barcelona and what measures had been taken to ensure they remained a secret. After half an hour of dragon history, I was ready to leave. Despite its name, Dragon Fundamentals was pretty dull.

Carlotta may have noticed our waning interest. "Let me show you the protected areas so that you do not accidentally wander into them."

We filed out of the room behind her. This time Leire didn't shove her way to the front of the line and instead was only a couple of people ahead of me.

"Can you believe her nerve?" I whispered to Beatriz

Beatriz looked ahead at Leire. "She's going to get herself in trouble.

She acts like she's better than the shifters themselves."

Leire heard us and dropped back so that she was walking alongside us. "Gossiping about me?"

"You're antagonizing the instructors," Beatriz said.

"They wanted us to ask questions. I'm asking questions."

"You could change your tone," I advised.

Leire's head snapped toward me. "I didn't ask you for your input. You're not even supposed to be here."

I was taken aback. How did she know?

Malice flashed in her eyes. "You took his place."

She didn't know about Christopher. She thought I was the reason the other guy was kicked out. "I didn't take his place. He lost it himself by saying he had other things to do."

"You aren't one of us. You don't belong here, and you're going to be leaving soon. I'll get you out of the program, you'll see." She gave me one nasty look and flounced away to the front.

Chapter 10

After Dragon Fundamentals, we were ordered to go back to our rooms and change into the outfits that were laid out on our beds. I found a green shirt and dark pants made of loose cotton. I raised the clothes to my nose and sniffed them. They smelled freshly laundered. I slipped them on and waited by the wing entrance.

Beatriz, Maribel, and Pol were already standing there with Kevin and Quentin. We all were dressed in identical outfits.

"Your hair goes well with this color," I told Maribel.

"Thanks." She raised a hand to tuck a strand of purple-blue hair behind her ear. Her charmstone earrings winked at me.

"What lesson do we have now?" Quentin asked.

"Didn't you read the schedule yet?" Kevin asked him. "And what would be your guess based on what we're wearing?"

"Enemy Combat and Self-Defense?" he asked.

Kevin nodded. "Yeah. Are you ready for me to make an enemy of you? I'm going to declare war and then beat you to a pulp."

All of us laughed. In the short two days we had been together we already knew that Kevin was the most peaceful one of the bunch. The only thing I didn't understand about him was his friendship with Leire. It seemed that they had hit it off immediately and usually paired up in the cafeteria.

Speak of the devil.

Leire ambled out of her room. Somehow the uniform looked different on her. Beatriz and I exchanged looks. Beatriz leaned over to me and asked, "What did she do to make it that form-fitting?"

"Looks like she tied up her shirt from the back," I said.

I was right. When Leire walked up to us, I saw that she had tied a knot in the back of her shirt so that it was tighter against her body. Beatriz hid a smile behind her hand.

A tall man showed up at the door. He had short, cropped hair the color of honey. His eyes reminded me of the sky on a winter day, gray and stormy and the way he stared at us felt like he was holding his anger at bay.

"Are you all here? I'm Enzo. Okay, let's take you to the training grounds." The man turned on his heel and marched away. We scrambled to keep up with his fast pace. This time we went through the courtyard to another section of the Center that we hadn't been before.

It was an open space with people training everywhere. Groups of men and women were stretching, running, or doing flips. In the center was a ring filled with sand where two men grappled with each other.

The air smelled of sweat, sand, and grass.

"Do you think we'll see the Enforcer fighting?" Maribel asked.

"That would be amazing," Pol chipped in.

"I heard he's so good he needs several people to fight him at once," Beatriz added.

Enzo led us over to the ring and pointed at the men fighting. "These men are dragon shifters. Watch them."

The men increased their speed and suddenly all I could see was a blur of motion. My eyes couldn't keep up with their movements. People near me exclaimed.

"Shifters are faster and more agile than humans," Enzo said. "As a result, you're at a disadvantage when it comes to fighting them. That doesn't mean that shifters will always win. It just means that you have to be more creative and thoughtful when it comes to combat. That's why in this class we attack first and ask questions later. Understood?"

I nodded and so did the others around me. The men in the ring continued to fight.

Enzo went on. "Supernaturals have come to an agreement to remain hidden from the non-magical world. Many have tried to change the dynamic and make humans aware of our existence but they were stopped by the rest of our community before they could do too much damage. Revealing the truth would only serve to create an imbalance in the world, so we hide. A privileged few, such as yourselves, have been invited to enter our world. Always remember: this is an honor and not a right. Reveal our existence and the penalty is severe."

As he ended his speech, a loud thud sounded and one of the shifters lay on his back in the middle of the ring. He had blood spilling from open cuts all over his body. Within seconds, though, the cuts knit together, and his body healed. Other than the blood, he looked as if he wasn't in a violent fight only moments ago. He got to his feet. It was one of the men who had teased me in the cafeteria, the one with the blue eyes. I glanced at the other fighter and saw it was his friend. He noticed me staring and gave me a wide grin. "Careful. Don't be a klutz in the ring. You'll get hurt."

I flushed as the others in my group turned to stare at me.

"Any questions so far?" Enzo asked the group.

"Who decides the laws?" Quentin asked.

"We have several regulatory bodies that come together and write the laws that we all follow."

"Do they rule over humans too?" he asked.

"Supernaturals have a moral obligation to protect humans because we're stronger. If people don't adhere to that, the community will take care of it."

"How?"

"Internal pack justice in some situations when it's shifters. There's also a Vampire Council. And there's a Supernatural Bureau of Investigation that will step in if necessary, but they're the last resort. Most supernatural communities are self-governing, and the model has worked so far." Enzo turned from Quentin and continued to address the group. "As DRIPs you have been given charmstone amulets. They declare you to other supernaturals as members of DRAC, so be sure to have them on display or you'll just be taken for another human. That said, you may end up a target due to them as well."

"What do you mean?" Maribel asked, concerned.

"Communities coexist peacefully as long as there is no friction," Enzo said. "But some may attack you in order to instigate other groups. That's why it's integral that you learn proper enemy combat and self-defense. You'll be trained in the many different methods enemies can attack you and learn how to engage them so that you have the opportunity to strike before they do."

"Who would attack dragon shifters?" Quentin asked.

Enzo looked around at us. "Does anyone have a guess?"

"Other supernaturals."

"Other shifters."

"Dragon shifters are in control at the moment. However, power shifts," Enzo said matter-of-factly.

"Vampires." I remembered that Guillen had mentioned friction between shifters and vampires.

Enzo nodded. "Yes, vampires and shifters do not have the best relationship. Your entertainment industry has got that right at least. You'll learn to fight all manners of supernaturals. But to start, you'll have to learn to fight against your own."

Enzo's gaze traveled over us and landed on Leire. "You. Choose someone to challenge in the ring."

Without missing a beat, Leire turned and pointed. "I want to fight her."

She pointed straight at me.

Chapter 11

Leire wanted to fight me.

I still wasn't sure how my presence antagonized her, but it had and now she had chosen me to fight in the ring.

Enzo looked back and forth between us. "Get inside the ring."

The two of us followed his instructions. I faced her as she prowled back and forth like a tiger. The rest of the group had moved to form a circle around us. Beatriz and Maribel were frowning. They knew Leire was out to get me. The rest of the group were interested in what would happen next. We waited for Enzo to give us further instructions.

Leire looked away from the group and I saw that her glance fell on the blue-eyed dragon shifter who had talked to me earlier. I scowled. She was doing this to impress a dragon shifter, and I was the unfortunate accessory to her show of vanity. If she thought she could beat me, she had another thing coming. I was suddenly thankful for all the self-defense classes my mother made me take.

Enzo spoke loudly so that everyone could hear. "There's only one rule when it comes to ring fights." He paused and examined all of our faces before he went on. "The fight remains within the ring. No exceptions. Step out of the ring and you're disqualified. Anything in the ring goes. That's the fighting of dragons. Your goal today is to get your opponent on the ground and have them tap out. The last one standing wins the fight."

Enzo nodded at each of us in turn. "Ready, go!" he barked.

Leire rushed at me with her head lowered and tackled me to the ground, knocking the breath out of me. Before I could recover, she threw her full weight on top of me.

She straddled my waist, but I was able to shove her off-balance. She made a grab for my arms, but I used my shoulder to wrench free of her grip.

I kicked at her and managed to knock her sideways, enough for me to shove her completely off of me. Breathing heavily, I scrambled to my feet. Leire crouched, watching me, trying to calculate my next move. I wasn't sure what to do.

"Attack," Enzo called out.

Oh. Right.

Leire lunged at me and I twisted to the side to dodge her. She was ferocious. I thought about my options. She lunged for me again and

grabbed my shirt. I grabbed her right hand with my left and twisted her fingers. She cried out in pain and her knees buckled. I thought about reducing the pressure, but I continued and shoved her to the ground. I did not sit on her like she did to me, but I was sorely tempted to.

"Tap out," I said.

She gritted her teeth. "No."

I made a grab for her other hand. She twisted away causing her to put more pressure on the hand I held, and she cried out in pain.

"Tap. Out," I repeated.

This was a trick I had picked up from wrestling with my brothers growing up. The two of them always outnumbered me but I knew that if I could get ahold of their fingers, I was sure to beat them. It got to the point where they would use boxing gloves when they wrestled with me just so that I couldn't grab them.

"I'll break your fingers," I warned her.

Fury in her eyes. "You wouldn't dare."

I put some more pressure on her fingers and she let out a wail of anguish. "Try me."

She used her leg to kick at me. I was ashamed to say it worked. I stumbled to the ground.

Leire came at me angrier than before.

She loomed over me and I saw her foot coming down toward my face.

But I don't remember what happened next. All I knew was suddenly Enzo's arms were around me and he was pulling me off of a crying Leire. She was laying on the ground, tearful eyes wide with fear, blood running down her face.

I blinked, breathing heavily. What had happened?

"I knew I said there weren't any rules, but I hadn't expected this level of viciousness." Enzo was staring at me. His face was a mixture of shock and fascination. Two of our group ran to Leire and helped her to her feet. She whimpered in pain, horrified every time she met my eyes. I looked around. Everyone in the group mirrored the same horror.

What had happened? Why couldn't I remember? What had I done?

I stared at the blood flowing down Leire's battered face.

Enzo's mouth was set in a grim line.

I searched for Beatriz in the crowd and even she looked at me like I was a monster.

I couldn't take it anymore.

I ran.

Chapter 12

I ran blindly and somehow managed to find my way back to the main part of the Center. I ran through the halls trying to get to my room. My mind kept screaming in panic. What had I done? Was I turning into my mother?

I ran faster. Suddenly a door ahead of me opened and a man stepped out. I couldn't stop in time. I crashed into him and bounced off as if I had run into a brick wall.

I fell to the ground. My breath was knocked out of my body. I gasped for air, my eyes widening. I couldn't catch my breath. My body was shaking, still reverberating from the shock of slamming into him.

I clawed at my throat in panic. I couldn't breathe.

The person I had crashed into bent down and stared intently at me. "Relax, you're fine. You can breathe. You're fine," he repeated.

My brain struggled to understand him. My body was still in panic mode and trying to get oxygen.

He reached out with both hands and grasped my shoulders gently. "You're fine, you're fine. Breathe. Relax."

He repeated the mantra as I focused on his brown eyes. He had thick black lashes. I couldn't help but realize what a strange thing to notice when I couldn't breathe. I gasped and gulped the air. I felt sick and light-headed, but my heart rate slowed and my body relaxed. His grip on my shoulders loosened. "Better?"

I gave him a shaky nod. As the adrenaline left my body I sagged. His hands tightened around me and he picked me up as if I was a child. I was as limp as a noodle. He crushed me against his chest and stroked my head like I was a cat. "You're fine," he repeated. "The shakes will go away soon."

I took deep, gasping breaths until I calmed down and regulated my oxygen intake. As the panic receded once and for all, I realized I was in the embrace of a stranger who was petting me like a house cat. It was soothing, but with my mind now thinking clearly I suddenly realized how strange it was.

Okay, now it was awkward.

I shifted to move away, and he released me from his grip.

"Where were you headed?" He looked down at me. He appeared ready to catch me if I began to droop, so I made sure to stand tall.

"My room." I winced at how weak my voice sounded.

His gaze dropped to my chest and I realized he was looking at my

charmstone pendant. His lifted his eyes to meet mine again. "You're a participant? DRIP?"

I nodded.

"I'll take you to your wing," he said.

"It's okay. I can get there myself," I protested. I was too embarrassed to be near this man anymore. I just wanted to be alone.

"You know your face is bloodied?" He tilted his head.

I raised a self-conscious hand to my face.

"Why is it bloodied?" he asked gently.

Before I could answer him, Enzo appeared. "There you are. I was coming to get you. I don't know what you were thinking, but we don't run away from our problems here."

Enzo turned to my helper. "Thanks for catching her."

"I didn't catch her. She caught me." He appeared bemused.

"Thank you," I muttered.

I couldn't help but glance back at him as Enzo and I walked away. My savior waved at me. I flushed and looked away.

Enzo told me off as soon as we were out of sight. "Trust *you* to cause trouble and then invite more problems by running into the Enforcer."

My head snapped up. "That was the Enforcer?" The man who had calmed me down and treated me with such gentleness and tenderness was the big, scary dragon shifter who everyone whispered about? He wasn't what I pictured the Enforcer to be.

"Yes," Enzo said sharply. "Of all the people you had to run into, it had to be Diego's second. Now I'm going to have to write a report about why I have a bloodied participant running around the Center." Enzo sighed as he resigned himself to the thought of all the additional work I had made for him.

"I'm sorry," I said

Enzo snorted. "Not yet, you're not, but you will be once you see what the punishment is for running out of training like that. It's off to the Dungeons for you."

I repressed a shudder.

Chapter 13

It turned out that the Center didn't have dungeons.

The Dungeons actually referred to two sisters who worked in Maintenance. Enzo dropped me off with a simple, "She's all yours."

Three hours later, I was laying on a couch in the reading room. I didn't want to be cooped up in my room, but I didn't want to socialize with the others, so I hid out there.

My whole body ached. Those women made me do disgusting tasks that I never knew a building required to function properly. Three hours of scraping off the built-up grease behind the kitchen fryolators and scrubbing the grout in the bathroom tiles made every inch of every muscle tighten up and ache.

I heard the door open. I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep. I heard the door close and footsteps making their way toward me.

"Vanessa?"

I opened my eyes and Beatriz's face peered at me in concern.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"No. I feel like I'm broken." I groaned as I moved up to a sitting position.

"What happened?" I knew she was asking about my fight with Leire, but I pretended to misunderstand her. "Enzo made me go to these women who put me up to a zillion tasks. You will not *believe* how nasty it is to clean out a drain pipe. There are the strangest things down there. I thought I saw something move."

Beatriz went along with it and sat down on the couch.

"I can believe it." She shook her head. "This is a strange place. It's crazy to think we've only been here for two days. It feels much longer."

"Tell me about it." It had felt like a century after the Dungeons got through with me.

Beatriz was silent for a moment before she spoke again. "I know you might not want to talk about it, but seriously, what happened out there in the ring? One moment Leire was knocking you about and the next, you started smashing her face in."

I felt a twinge of shame. "Is she okay?"

"Well, she had to be taken to the infirmary. She still isn't back, but I heard from Kevin that she'll be okay. She's just in a lot of pain."

"I don't know what happened." I cradled my head in my hands.

"What do you mean?"

"I honestly don't know. I don't remember. It was like you said: one minute she was beating me and then all I could see was her foot and she was about to step on me and the next thing I remember is her screaming and her face was all bloody."

"You must have just snapped," Beatriz said.

"No." I shook my head. "It felt like it was more than that."

I raised my head from my hands and looked her square in the eyes. "I think enjoyed it."

Her eyes widened. "What you mean by that?"

"I... Something inside me was thrilled that I was beating her," I confessed.

"That doesn't seem like you. I know we don't know each other very well, but you come across as a gentle soul."

I smiled at her kind words. "It isn't like me, but what if this place is changing me?" I voiced my fear aloud. I had thought that entering this hidden world would be amazing but what if it brought out the worst in me? I was terrified that I was slowly unraveling like my mother had. I dropped my head, ashamed to look Beatriz in the eye.

"Well, I still think you just snapped and you're just not thinking straight. Give it a day, but ignore what people say, okay?" she assured me.

"Why? What are they saying?" I looked up at her.

"Well, Pol thought it was the coolest thing," Beatriz grinned. "Most of the guys think that, actually, except for Kevin."

"He's Leire's friend," I said quietly.

"Yes, but some of the girls were secretly happy because she had been lording over them. They all wish it was them beating on her."

"Really?" I rubbed my shoulder.

"Yes. Does that make you feel better?"

"No, it actually kind of makes me feel worse."

"Don't worry about it. I expect we'll go through a few more things like this and people will start talking about something else." Beatriz stretched her legs.

I lowered my head again. "People already think I don't belong here."

"That's not true. That was just Leire. We're all the same here. A few days ago, we didn't know any of this existed." She paused. "I'll confess something to you. That class scared me. I started the day thinking all of this was amazing and that getting to see this beautiful magic around us that other humans will never see was incredible. I forgot about the scary part." She saw my expression and quickly said, "Not about you, it wasn't you. I mean the vampires. Think about it: we have vampires as enemies now because we've aligned ourselves to the

shifters. We didn't know this coming in. We came in and we saw all the pretty things and now they're telling us that we have to learn enemy attack combat *before* self-defense combat. What are they really training us for, and how dangerous is this hidden world?"

She was right.

What did we get ourselves into?

Chapter 14

Beatriz's words echoed in my head long after she left. What had we gotten ourselves into?

I found myself growing restless. I looked at the clock: I had one hour before curfew. That was just enough time to go for a walk and return. I needed to clear my head.

I stood up, walked to Beatriz's room, and knocked on the door. "Come in," she called out. I pushed open the door. She was laying on her bed reading a book.

"Do you want to go out for a walk with me?" I asked.

Beatriz raised an eyebrow. "At this time?"

"Yes, I can't seem to sit still. I need to move or something."

"I thought you were exhausted from the Dungeons."

"I am, but I hate feeling trapped. It's how I feel right now." From time to time, this feeling would come over me and I'd always followed the compulsion to escape. Back home I'd had to sneak out of the window sometimes just to get out of the place. Luckily, I didn't have to do that now. I glanced out at the balcony.

"Sorry, I'm feeling lazy. I'll stay behind. Maybe next time. Don't get locked out," she warned.

"I won't," I said.

I made my way down the three floors and to the front desk. The boy there waved lazily. "Be back by eleven. You don't want to be locked out."

I briefly entertained the idea of what would happen if I was locked out. Like Beatriz's room, my room had a balcony. I wondered if I would be able to scale the building if it came to that. I'd have to check it out one day. It never hurt to have a back-up plan.

I walked out of the Center and inhaled the fresh air. The streets were winding down, but there were still plenty of people out and about. Barcelona was a city that never really slept. It only had brief *siestas* in the evening and then things would start up again.

As I walked, I reflected on how quickly my life had changed over the past few days. My hand reached for my pendant. I could slip this off and be blind to the new wonders around me. I had passed a few pointed-ear people. There had also been some short creatures that resembled goblins. The awe I felt seeing them overcame the fear that I had been harboring inside me.

Mother always told me that life would be scary but amazing. She

wasn't wrong. Ever since her incident, she would issue cryptic warnings every time I visited her. Her warnings didn't seem so cryptic anymore. She had always told me life was an amazing and awful place. I thought she meant the facility she was in, but now I knew that I was wrong. I wondered if she had known about this world all along. I'd have to remember to ask her that.

I wondered if I would be able to tell the different types of shifters after some more training. It was embarrassing to admit but all the shifters I had seen seemed really attractive. I wondered if that was true of all shifters or if I was just focused on the beautiful ones. What did vampires look like? Were they traditionally fanged creatures like in the movies? Did their reflections disappear in mirrors or could they turn into bats?

A man walking ahead of me would have fit the vampire role in my musings. He moved lightly and had dark hair and a lean figure. I could imagine him turning into a bat and flying away. Without realizing it, lost in my thoughts, I started following him. Luckily, his path was similar to mine and led to the park. He turned off the main street onto a smaller one, and I decided to continue following him. It was still the direction I was heading anyways.

I was so busy creating vampire theories that I didn't see that he was following someone himself. I only noticed after the woman ahead of him took a turn and he did too. Unsure if my suspicions had any foundation, I decided to continue walking behind him. I had to drop back some pace. The streets had less traffic here and there were fewer people rather than the hustle-and-bustle of the main streets. If the man glanced back, I would have nowhere to hide.

Thinking myself a fool for indulging this theory, I continued tracking him regardless. I was so cautious at keeping a distance that when I turned a corner I knew he had taken, I didn't see him. I nearly laughed at my foolishness. He must live in the area and slipped through a door.

Then a sound caught my attention.

I stilled, trying to identify where it came from.

I moved forward until I reached the entrance of a narrow alley.

I made it in time to see a woman bring down her dagger right into the man's heart.

A gasp escaped me. The woman's head snapped to my shocked figure and her eyes narrowed. Under the gaze of a predator, I stood rooted to the spot. My hand went to my charmstone amulet as if it could teleport me out of the situation.

The woman opened her mouth to speak, but before she said anything, the man reached for her face. She turned back to him and my senses returned to me.

Fight or flight.
I did the only thing that made sense.
I ran.

Chapter 15

The boy at the front desk looked surprised when he saw me. "You still have time. There was no need for you to run all the way back."

I imagined my face was red from all the huffing after sprinting for blocks. "That's okay," I gasped. I walked past him to the stairs leading to the bedroom wing. There was only one person I trusted to tell. I went straight to Beatriz's room and knocked. A distant "Come in" prompted me to push open the door and enter.

Beatriz had moved from her bed to the balcony. She waved me over.

I stepped outside and sank into the seat across from her. She frowned at my huffing and placed the book she was reading in her lap. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Still trying to catch my breath, I shook my head.

"Is it Leire?" she asked.

"No, it's nothing to do with her." I had forgotten about Leire. She was the last thing on my mind.

"Something happened while you were out?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do I have to drag it out of you? Tell me! What happened?" She sat up and leaned forward.

"I think I saw a vampire being killed."

She blinked at me. Of all the things that she had expected me to say, I don't think that was one of them. "You *what*?"

"I think I saw a woman kill a vampire," I repeated. It was important that Beatriz believed me.

"Where?" Beatriz asked. Her eyebrows were knit together.

"In an alley on the way to the park."

"Did you tell anyone?"

I shook my head. "And I'm beginning to wonder if he really was a vampire."

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "I had seen so many different creatures. I wondered what a vampire looked like and he seemed to fit the type."

"What type?"

"He was quiet and dark-haired."

She looked at me incredulously. "Really? That describes half the people in this program. Actually, that describes most of the people under this roof."

"I don't know. All I know was I started following him and when I thought he had disappeared, suddenly I saw him being stabbed by a woman."

"Who was the woman? Was she a supernatural?" Beatriz asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. She just looked like a woman. Beatriz, she saw my pendant."

"What happened then?"

"I ran."

Beatriz tilted her head. "Do you need to go the infirmary?"

"What? No, the woman didn't get me."

She bit her lip. She struggled to say something.

"What?" I asked her.

Her voice was gentle. "Do you think you being knocked around earlier may have led to you seeing this?"

My mouth dropped open. "You think I'm imagining things?"

"Not imagining, but maybe you didn't see what you thought you did."

"Maybe I was wrong coming to you."

Beatriz flinched. She held up her hands. "I'm just saying, your story sounds a little far-fetched."

I stood up, my hands clenched in fists. I was angry. "I know what I saw."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm glad you got away. I think that was the best thing you could have done."

A choked laugh came out of my throat. "What about enemy combat?"

"Running is better than enemy combat and self-defense. I don't care what they say." Beatriz smacked the book in her lap for emphasis.

"Well, it seems that I'm excelling at running today. Actually, scratch that. I forgot to tell you that I crashed into the Enforcer."

"What?" Beatriz squealed. "You did what? And you didn't tell me about that? What was he like? What did he say?"

"I crashed into him, I didn't have dinner with him." I found myself unwilling to mention that he had pulled me into his arms and carried me like a baby. "Running into him felt like I ran into a wall. He literally knocked the breath out of me."

Beatriz's eyes sparkled with laughter.

I ran my hand through my hair. "Never mind him. What am I going to do about the vampire?"

"Nothing," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you do nothing, you say nothing. For all they know you didn't see anything." She shrugged.

"Are you sure?" I bit my lip. Not telling anyone seemed worse than

running away.

"You're already in trouble for what happened earlier. Do you want to draw more attention to yourself? They might single you out as a troublemaker."

I thought about Beatriz's words and the fact that I hadn't entered the program due to my interview, but because Christopher has interceded. She didn't know about that, but she had a point.

I gnawed on my bottom lip.

"What about the vampire?" I asked again.

"Remember, we're on the side of the shifters, so technically one less vampire is good for us."

"That doesn't sound right."

She shrugged. "I'm still trying to figure this out. It's scary, so stay away from the scary things, okay?"

"Yes, you're right. This whole thing *is* incredibly scary." I looked out at the view beyond the balcony. Beatriz had a good vantage point of the park. I could almost imagine people watching me. The hair on my arms stood up as I imagined the supernaturals that might lay beyond. We sat for some time until Beatriz said, "Actually..." She hesitated.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I changed my mind. Maybe you should tell them. I was wrong about them thinking you would be a troublemaker. Guillen wouldn't think that. I don't want to give you bad advice. Will you tell them?"

"I'll think about that." She didn't know that Guillen had been one of the ones who hadn't wanted me to join the program. This might give him the reason to kick me out. If there was anyone I could talk to, it was Christopher, but I hadn't seen him since that day.

"No, really I think that the advice I gave you earlier was wrong," Beatriz repeated.

"I'll tell them tomorrow," I lied to her. Beatriz didn't know who "them" was.

"Tell them," she insisted.

"I will."

Chapter 16

I left Beatriz's room, still feeling spooked. I opened the door to my room and frowned when I attempted to close it. The door appeared stuck. I pushed at it and it swung shut with a slam. I turned the lock and walked toward my bed.

I went to the bathroom. As I washed my hands, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. So much had happened. My mind was still thinking of what I had witnessed. I padded outside. I took off my charmstone pendant and stared at the fire that seemed to blaze within it. I put it away on my desk and began to take off my shirt.

"Please don't do that. It will make things awkward."

I almost jumped out of my skin. I spun around.

A woman with short, dark, curly hair leaned against the door, arms crossed against her chest.

"Who are you?" I stood and grabbed the closest thing to me to use as a weapon and held it in front of me in warning. Unfortunately, it was just my charmstone amulet.

The woman uncrossed her arms and stepped forward, bringing her face into the light. I stifled a gasp. It was the woman from the alley.

I waved the amulet front of me. "Don't come any closer!" I warned her. I walked backwards around the bed as she moved closer to me.

She paused and raised an eyebrow. "Or what? You'll hit me with a necklace?"

I grabbed the Code of Conduct book from my desk and threw it at her.

"Hey!" She frowned and rubbed her arm where the book had hit her. She bent down to pick it up and turned it over to read the title. "Oh, I've read this one. It's good reading. Every rule break results in death. You shouldn't throw books around." She set it down on my bed and I froze, confused by her calm demeanor.

"Aren't you here to kill me?" I asked.

"No, why would I do that?" She appeared genuinely surprised.

"You killed that vampire in the alley."

"Yes." She didn't expand upon that.

"Why?" My curiosity got the best of me.

"It was his day." She ran a hand through her curls, shaking them loose.

"How did you find me?" I pulled the charmstone amulet over my head, tucking it under my shirt.

"Suspicious type, aren't you? Well, that keeps you alive so don't forget. Don't trust anyone. Anyways, I saw the charmstone and I know they're limited. I asked around and found there was a new batch of kids in the program. It was relatively easy."

"That was pretty fast," I said.

"I've got connections. Now, I'm just going to cast a little spell to make you forget what you saw."

"Why? I won't say anything." I backed farther away from her.

"The people I work for don't like having witnesses. If I don't do it, they'll come after you. Trust me, it's better this way." She snorted at her own line. "Okay, I know I just told you not to trust people, but trust me on this one."

"I don't want you to put a spell on me." I backed up until my back hit the wall. There were two exits to the room, the door and the balcony, and she was in my way for both.

"You don't really have much of a choice. I could wait until you're asleep and do it then, but I try not to be so sneaky."

She waited patiently as I thought about my options. I knew she was a killer. If I refused, there was a chance that she could kill me. It would be best for me to cooperate. It would also solve the problem of me having to report to the dragon shifters. I can't report something that I couldn't remember.

My resolve solidified, but I needed to set conditions. "You promise you'll only erase memories of what happened in the alley?"

"Yes," she said.

"Fine." I moved forward to the bed and sat down.

She approached me swiftly and removed her dagger from her jacket. I closed my eyes and heard her drop the dagger on my nightstand. I opened my eyes again. Her expression was amused. "I'm not going to kill you. I could do that quietly without all this fuss."

"Go on then, get it over with," I said through gritted teeth. I hated the idea that my memories would be altered, but I didn't want more supernaturals to come after me.

"My name's Aisha. What's yours?" she asked suddenly.

"Vanessa." I wondered why she was telling me her name if she was about to remove it from my recollection.

"It helps if you relax when I work this spell." She laughed at the expression on my face. "I'm not a mind-reader but I can see how tense you are."

"How did you find me if you didn't know my name?" I still wasn't buying her explanations of following the charmstones.

"I'm very good at tracking people." She raised her hands and placed them on my head. I flinched and looked up at her but her eyes were closed in concentration. I wondered how long this would take.

Aisha frowned and opened her eyes. "Are you wearing a magicked item?"

My hands pulled out my pendant from under my shirt. "Just this."

"Take it off," she commanded.

I complied with her request.

She took the pendant from me and examined it. "This is beautiful. Dina's a true artist."

"You know her?" Was that how she had found me?

"She's a friend." Aisha turned the pendant over. "You must love dragons if you signed up to be around them all the time."

Aisha reached a hand out and placed it on my head again. A look of concentration came over her face. After a few seconds, she rocked back on her heels.

"What is it?" I couldn't decipher the expression on her face.

"I thought it was the pendant, but it's not."

"What's not? What are you talking about?"

She hesitated, her eyes studying me.

"Tell me!" I insisted. Whatever it was, I could handle it.

Aisha pressed her lips together. Reluctantly, she spoke up. "You're a witch."

"What?" I recoiled. That was the last thing I had expected her to say. "No, I can't be." I remembered what the gargoyle Mateu told me about supernaturals not being allowed to be in the program.

"You're a witch," Aisha nodded slowly, her expression grim. "Just wait until the dragons find out what they've brought into their castle..."

Chapter 17

Sharp talons slashed at my face, missing me by mere inches. I jumped back in alarm and fell to the ground. I yelped at my attacker. "Are you trying to tear my face off?"

The shifter's ice-blue eyes glittered as she let out a high-pitched cackle. "What do you think?"

"This is crazy," I said, the panic clear in my voice.

She moved toward me with a predatory step. I scrambled backwards, looking around frantically for a weapon. My gaze fell upon a sword and a club laying on the ground about ten feet away. I pushed myself to my feet and sprinted toward the club. I picked it up and turned to face the shifter.

"What are you going to do with that?" Amusement colored her voice. She could have stopped me at any time. My speed was a snail's pace compared to her supernatural one.

"I'm going to smash your head in," I told her boldly. Despite its weight, the club was easy to pick up and wield. I imagined it was a baseball bat and visualized exactly how I would hit her.

The shifter threw her head back and laughed again. I couldn't see what was so funny. If she was going to claw off my face, then I would club hers to oblivion. "Let's see you try that, human," she sneered.

The word made something inside me twist. I pushed the feelings aside, locking them away. There was time for that later if I survived this encounter.

"My name's Vanessa," I told her, glaring back at her smug expression.

"Come on then, Vanessa, let's see what you've got," the shifter said as she cracked her knuckles.

I winced at the sound.

A sharp smile crossed her face. She rushed at me and I raised the club and swung toward her. Before the club could connect with her body, she dropped to the ground as if she was about to do a push-up. The club swung harmlessly over her head. She jumped back up, showing off her agility and strength as her knees reached her chest. Before I could swing the club back around, her hand clamped around my neck and she lifted me off the ground. I dropped the club, my hands clawing at her fingers which tightened around my neck like a noose. She raised me higher as if I was as light as a kitten. My toes barely touched the floor.

"It seems like the club isn't the best weapon for you," she mused, glancing at the discarded object.

I cursed at her, but it came out as a strangled gurgle.

She tilted her head and looked at me as if contemplating how easy it would be to simply tighten those fingers around my neck and end my life. I raised a knee and tried to kick at her body, but she blocked me with her left hand. I used my other leg to kick her and winced as I made contact with her hard body. She swatted at me like I was a fly.

It was becoming more difficult to breathe.

"You're still far too slow," she said. "You have to work more on your defensive skills."

No kidding.

Her fingers released me, and I fell to the ground as my legs gave out under me. She looked down at me as I gasped for air. She rolled her eyes at my slumped form.

"She's alright," she said.

Still trying to get my breath back, I frowned, wondering who she was talking to.

"I didn't hurt her," she said over her shoulder to a person I couldn't see. "Much," she added.

She pivoted to the side, revealing a tall man with a grim expression on his face and narrowed eyes. Guillen.

"What are you doing with Vanessa?" he asked Shaima.

"She asked for self-defense lessons. I've been giving them to her." Shaima shrugged.

Guillen's expression asked me to confirm or deny her assertion.

I opened my mouth and a croak came out instead of a yes. I cleared my throat and tried again. "I asked her. She didn't hurt me," I confirmed. "Much."

"Why?" Guillen asked me. "Have you been threatened?"

"I used to take self-defense lessons back in my old town." It was the truth. Ever since my mother had tried to kill me, I had been taking consistent classes. And when she had tried to kill me again I worked even harder to protect myself. I didn't want to forget what I'd learned especially in light of where I was living.

I had purposely ignored answering Guillen's question. I hadn't been threatened yet, but every day that I spent living in the Dragon Research and Authority Center was another day that I was at risk. I had been admitted into the Dragon Research Initiate Program as a human. It wasn't until Aisha, the assassin, had tried to wipe my memory that I had discovered that I was a witch. And if the dragons knew what I was, then they would kill me. They wouldn't suffer a witch to live among them.

But I couldn't just leave the program. I needed to find out more

about what I was, but the longer I stayed, the more I risked someone discovering my secret.

"Self-defense lessons with a shifter isn't the same as human self-defense lessons," Guillen said, stating the obvious.

"We've had several lessons. I haven't sent her to the infirmary yet." Shaima cracked her knuckles. The sound made me wince again. I ran a hand up to my neck and felt the soreness there. That was going to leave a bruise.

Guillen watched my hand and frowned at Shaima. "As long as you remember she's just a human."

If he only knew.

Chapter 18

I had just stepped out of the shower and was getting dressed in my room when someone knocked on the door.

"Yes?" I called out. I pulled a t-shirt over my head.

"Hey, Vanessa, want to join us in the cafeteria?" Beatriz asked me from the other side of the door.

"Sure. I'll be there in two minutes. Don't leave without me."

"Okay," Beatriz said.

I quickly finished dressing and left my room, locking the door behind me. I stepped into the communal living area for the Dragon Research Initiate Program participants. It was located in a wing of the Center. There were twelve rooms here. Some of the bedroom doors were open, music streaming out of the rooms. I walked over to the living room where I thought Beatriz would be. I was right. She was sitting on the couch chatting with Pol and Maribel.

"I'm ready," I told her.

Beatriz got to her feet. "Are you joining us?" she asked the others.

Maribel shook her head, her short blue hair bobbing. "I need to study."

"Sure," Pol stood. "I could eat."

I didn't bother hiding my smile. Pol was always eating, but you couldn't tell from his lanky frame.

"Are you guys going to the cafeteria?" Quentin asked.

"Yeah," Beatriz replied.

"I'll join you, if that's okay," he said.

"Sure," she gave me a discreet sideways glance and arched her eyebrow. I returned her silent query with a shrug. In the past three weeks I had acquainted myself with some of my other classmates, but Quentin was still a dark horse to me. He gave off a cool vibe, but where Pol was usually amusing and an open book, I never knew what Quentin was thinking.

We made our way down the hallway and stairs, navigating the Center's maze-like layout to reach the cafeteria. The cafeteria was always open and depending on the hour, there could be dozens of people there or just a handful. At this time, there were only two dragon shifters eating their meals, but I didn't recognize them. I checked out the food available, grabbing a tray and piling on *patatas bravas* and chicken skewers. We sat at one of the several empty tables.

"How was your self-defense class?" Beatriz asked me.

My hand went up to my neck. "Tough. I can't seem to make any progress."

"Why did you decide to take classes with her?"

I shrugged and returned to eating. Things between Beatriz and me had been strange since I found out that I was a witch. I had told Beatriz about it, but that was before her memory had been erased. Aisha the assassin-witch had crept into the Center and tried to wipe my memory too, but she couldn't. That's how I had discovered I was a witch. It had been a shock to the both of us. Since Aisha couldn't erase my memory, she warned me against telling Beatriz again, and ever since then the secret hung between us. Even though Beatriz didn't know, she still felt that something was off and asked me a few times if there was anything wrong with me. I tried to act normally, but it was still weird knowing what I was and keeping it from my closest friend. I felt isolated and alone. And I was scared to death that the shifters would find out. I had contemplated returning home, but if I did that, then I wouldn't get any answers. I would also have to give the dragon shifters their charmstone back, and without it I would be unable to see the hidden magical world. I had to stay here and figure it out.

"Can you believe we've been here over a month already?" Quentin bit into his burger.

I shook my head. "Time has flown by."

"And the more I find out about this crazy world, the more I'm surprised by it," Pol said, putting his tray on the table. "Did you guys know that there's a challenge that everyone fights to the death?"

Beatriz and I goggled at him. "What?"

Quentin said, "Yes, I heard about it too. I don't know how things remain stable with all these power struggles."

"Does Diego win every time?" Beatriz asked.

"I guess so, otherwise he wouldn't be the head of the dragon shifters." Pol took a sip of his drink.

None of us had met or seen Diego yet. For all we knew, he was a giant monster with enormous jaws. The other dragon shifters rarely discussed him. When we asked, they'd reply with vague answers. If it hadn't been for my encounter with Aisha, the witch who had tried to erase my mind, I would have questioned Diego's existence entirely. But she had mentioned him by name when she warned me against letting the dragons know my secret. She said his name as if he was a bogeyman.

"So do they *kill them* kill them?" Beatriz asked.

"Yeah," Pol made a slicing motion across his neck. "Dead."

"How many people does he fight?" she asked.

"Whoever wants to challenge him."

"Is it just dragons?" I asked. Since my acceptance into the program,

I had learned that there were other kinds of shifters besides dragons. And I continued to discover new supernaturals every day. So far, I had met two witches, some gargoyles, and witnessed a vampire die. Ever since then I had isolated myself in the Center. I had only visited my family once since I had started the program. Most supernaturals were nice, but others weren't. This world was dangerous, especially if you were the smallest fish in the pond.

Yes, it had been a shock finding out that I was a witch.

The first thing I did was ask for self-defense lessons. Guillen had waved it off, so I asked another instructor and she had moved me to Shaima.

"How are your lessons going?" Pol asked.

"She's still getting the better of me." It was frustrating how little progress I was making.

"She's a dragon shifter. Of course she's going to beat you every time," he chuckled.

"She said that I was faster than regular humans." I had hoped I was showing some magical ability.

"You are. We all saw that," Quentin said.

I bit my lip. Quentin was referring to my fight and subsequent flight on my second day at the Center. I didn't want to talk about it.

"I've noticed you haven't fought or challenged anybody since then. Are you scared?" Quentin asked.

"Don't be rude," Beatriz hissed at him.

"She's not scared." Pol's eyes were soft with understanding. "She just doesn't want to hurt anybody. Even if it's Leire."

I suddenly found it difficult to swallow.

"Leire deserved what she got." Quentin shrugged. "It's not like she learned anything anyways. She's still making your life difficult."

The Dragon Research Initiate Program was new to all of us. Jumping into a magical world with the help of a charmstone had been a shock, but most of us managed to adjust. Except for Leire. She seemed intent on making my life a living hell. I supposed I didn't make her adjustment to this new world easy by beating her up on the second day, but I still didn't remember what happened. All I knew is that she had challenged me to a fight, and I had met her challenge, sending her straight to the infirmary. She had been extra horrible since then, trying to find various ways to annoy me.

Beatriz let out a snort. "That's true. Leire never knew how to be sensible," she said. She had the unfortunate experience of knowing Leire before they joined the program.

"Well, at least she knows you can beat her to a pulp." Quentin smirked.

I shook my head. "I don't want to beat her. I hate violence. That's

the reason I'm taking self-defense. I don't want to hurt anyone. I want to be able to protect myself without hurting others."

"You're not going to hurt anybody," Pol consoled me. "Besides, you should know about magic."

My eyes widened in shock. "What? What do you mean?"

He smirked and returned to his food.

What did he know?

"You know all about magic," Quentin echoed.

I glanced between my two classmates, Quentin and Pol. "What do you mean?"

"You talked to that gargoyle at the magic store forever. I overheard you asking him about magic," Pol said. He frowned. "What do you think I meant?"

I let out a sigh of relief. He didn't know my secret after all. Beatriz gave me a strange look. I forced a smile on my face. "I don't know. We talked about gargoyles mainly."

"Do you want to go back to that store?" Pol asked us. "I'd love to know more."

I thought about it, stabbing one of the *patatas bravas*. Maybe I could find some answers to my questions. "Sure, why not?"

Quentin took another bite out of his burger, chewed, and shrugged. He clearly didn't care either way.

"Maybe they sell love potions." Beatriz's eyes lit up. She clapped. "Yes, let's go back there. When can we go?"

Pol laughed. "Who are you trying to spell?"

"Nobody," she mumbled. Her face flushed.

He gave her a lazy grin. "Who is it? We could help you out."

Beatriz tucked her head down in embarrassment. Pol exchanged glances with Quentin. He raised an eyebrow at me and I shook my head. I had my suspicions of why she was suddenly so shy, but I wasn't going to give away her secret.

"We'll go tomorrow after classes are over." Quentin finished his burger, licking the crumbs off his fingers.

"What do we have last class tomorrow?" Beatriz asked.

"Dragon Fundamentals," I replied.

We had classes every day from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon when we broke for lunch. After that we resumed classes from five to eight in the evening. The whole program was designed to prepare us for excellence which was why we took regular classes in addition to supernatural ones like Leadership Basics, Treasure Hunting, Community Dynamics, and Enemy Combat and Self-Defense. It was in the Enemy Combat and Self-Defense class that Leire had challenged me.

"Okay, we'll go there tomorrow," Pol confirmed.

"Do you think that gargoyle will be there?" Beatriz asked me.

"He probably won't. Do you think he hangs out at the store all day?" Quentin answered before I could reply. "He doesn't work there."

"Do you remember how to get there?" Beatriz asked us.

We all laughed. She was joking of course.

"As if I'm going to forget. Guillen just made us go round and round in circles." Quentin rolled his eyes.

"You have to give him credit. We're never going to forget that part of El Born again," Pol said.

I nodded. "Isn't it strange that all these magical creatures have been walking around us for years, but we couldn't see them?"

Technically, I had just moved to Barcelona a few months ago. Before we moved, I lived in a small town outside of Malaga. I had asked Guillen if supernaturals were exclusive to Barcelona and he told me that they were all over the world.

"Yes, and all it took was this." Beatriz raised her hand to show off her ring. A bright charmstone was set in the center. My hand went to the amulet around my neck. My charmstone was in a pendant. I glanced at the guys. Each one of them had a charmstone too.

"I wonder how these charmstones work," Pol mused.

Guillen had taken us on a tour of El Born when we first entered the program. We saw what every human typically saw, from storefronts to the Cathedral and other buildings. But then we had received our charmstones from *Karam Jewelry* and when we put them on everything around us changed. The world still looked the same, but its secrets were exposed as soon as we had our charmstones. We suddenly saw the supernaturals in all shapes and forms. Human glamour fell away. We saw pointed ears, furry faces, and strange creatures that walked among us invisible from human sight.

What my classmates didn't know was that I also saw a murder because of the charmstone around my neck. Secrets had been revealed to us but I had also started hiding some from the others. I couldn't let them know what I had seen and learned, but I could use their help to find out more.

Chapter 20

"Magic exists in every creature, whether you're aware of it it or not. Even you humans have a spark of magic in your core." Guillen paused as his eyes took in all of us gathered in the classroom.

Beatriz, Pol, Quentin and I had agreed the previous day that we were going out after class. I didn't know about them but it had been a long day for me and the anticipation of leaving was almost killing me. I couldn't wait to get out of the Dragon Research and Authority Center.

"One last thing before we end the class. We need volunteers to scrub the cobblestones in preparation for the shifter gathering."

Voices murmured through the class as the others repeated the words, *shifter gathering*. Leire's arm shot in the air. I exchanged a surprised look with Beatriz. Leire didn't strike me as the type that would voluntarily clean after people. She would much rather be the one that made the mess.

"Yes?" Guillen said.

"Vanessa has been saying she'd love to give back to the Center for all the opportunities you've given us. I'm sure she'd love to volunteer."

My jaw dropped. Did she just volunteer me?

Beatriz bit her lip. Even Pol and Quentin glanced at me from their seats. Quentin frowned at the look on my face. Pol raised an eyebrow and I shook my head.

"Vanessa doesn't mind, does she?" Leire's eyes cut into me. The smile on her lips didn't quite hide the malice in her eyes.

"Actually..." I started.

"I would prefer each volunteer put forward their own name," Guillen interrupted, talking to Leire. "I am glad you feel this way and will add your name to the list since I am sure you too would like to give back to the Center for all the opportunities you've been afforded."

Leire opened her mouth.

Guillen smiled, showing off his very sharp teeth.

Leire shut her mouth and slumped in her seat, defeated.

Guillen looked around the class. "I'm happy that Leire has chosen to be a good example. I'm going to put a paper on the desk. Sign up on your way out." He dismissed us.

I pushed back my chair as I got to my feet.

"Do you want me to talk to her?" Quentin said, from behind me.

I craned my neck around to look at him. "You'd do that?"

A crease appeared on his brow. "Of course. I'd do *anything* for you."

I rocked on my heels at the emotion behind his words. A flush rose to his face and he dropped his eyes to the ground as his words echoed in the silence.

A surge of warmth rose in my chest. I felt my lips turn up in a smile. "Thank you."

His eyes met mine. They seemed to search my face for something and from the answering smile that appeared on his face it seemed he found what he was looking for. "You're welcome."

Pol cleared his throat noisily. "So what are you going to do about her?"

I turned away from them and watched Leire's back. She was made her way out of the classroom. My voice could have frozen water as I replied, "I'll take care of her myself."

Beatriz appeared by my side. She looked at us, practically bouncing on her heels. "Come on, forget Leire and her drama. Let's get out of here and go to *Magic Runes*."

Chapter 21

We left the Dragon Research and Authority Center eager to visit *Magic Runes*. All of us were in high spirits. The weather was crisp with a few clouds on the horizon. The smell of leaves was in the air. I took a deep breath.

"Do you guys want to play a game?" Pol teased.

"What game?" I asked.

"Human or supe?" he replied.

Beatriz raised her eyebrows. "A guessing game?"

"Yes, let's see who's best at identifying who's a human or a supe."

I bit my lip.

"What?" Pol asked, noting my indecision.

"Do you think we should be playing around with the charmstones?" I asked tentatively.

"Consider it part of our training. We need to learn how to spot these creatures. What if one day they took these away?" He glanced down at his charmstone and back at me. "Wouldn't you want to be able to spot them without it?"

"I don't think you'll figure it out that easily." I didn't say what was on my mind: that I was one of the supernaturals, a witch, and that even the dragon shifters hadn't been able to see it. Aisha had told me that they hadn't noticed me because my magic was locked and hadn't manifested itself yet. She hadn't been able to let me know why or even how to unlock it. It's the reason I wanted to talk to somebody so badly. I wanted to figure it out.

Any knowledge I gained would be helpful. I couldn't let my classmates know, but maybe if I turned it into a game, they would help me with information and help me figure it out unknowingly.

"Okay, who wants to go first?" Quentin asked.

Beatriz shrugged. "I will."

She slipped off her ring and put it in her pocket.

The three of us glanced at each other. "So how does this work?" she asked.

"Let's just point out a person and ask her," Pol suggested.

"Okay," I said.

We were walking along Via Laietana and spotted a thin creature with pointed ears. I couldn't tell if he was an elf or fae. Although we'd been exposed to the magical world for weeks now, we still hadn't figured out all the different subspecies of supernaturals. The dragons

were self-involved and mainly discussed themselves. Not that they told us much about them anyway. Well, they told us the boring parts but not the interesting bits we wanted to know.

"The man in the green shirt," Pol told Beatriz.

She squinted. I wondered what she saw without the help of the charmstone. I saw a slim man with pointed ears and his features had an unearthly glow. His high cheekbones with delicate features showcased his supernaturalness. We knew that Beatriz probably just saw a man in a green shirt.

"Human," Beatriz said.

"Put on your charmstone." Pol laughed.

She slipped it on her finger and groaned.

"What did he look like to you?" Pol tilted his head.

"He just looked like a regular guy."

"Who wants to go next?" Quentin asked.

We kept walking. There weren't that many supernaturals to point out. "How about we play this game at a coffeeshop and we can point at the people that pass by us?" I suggested. I glanced around. "I don't think the dragons would be happy if they knew we were walking around and discussing charmstones so loudly."

"Guillen did it," Pol pointed out.

"I'm guessing Guillen has different privileges than we do," Quentin said. "Vanessa's right."

Pol shrugged. "Whatever."

We turned the corner and found ourselves on the street where *Magic Runes* was. Beatriz pushed at the door but it didn't budge. Quentin pointed at the note on the door. "Can't you see the note?"

The note said, "Away for some time." The storeowner, Carmen, had signed it and left her phone number. We glanced at each other. "What do you want to do now?" I asked.

"We can still play the game," Pol suggested.

"Let's go find somewhere to sit." Quentin looked around us.

Chapter 22

We wandered through the streets. We passed an ice cream shop and Pol made us stop so he could have some. We continued navigating the inner streets of El Born, passing by graffitied walls and tapas bars.

"How about that place?" I pointed. "But I guess the game would be guess which supernatural is which kind."

A sign over the restaurant identified it as *Miguel's*. It was simple. A couple of supernaturals lingered outside chatting. We walked past them and into the restaurant. The place was bursting with supernaturals. I saw the astonishment that I felt reflected on the faces of my friends. This was the first time we had seen so many different kinds of supernaturals at once. The guys were awed. Someone bumped into me. I turned around but didn't see anyone. A tug on my pant leg made me look down. "Are you just going to stand there blocking our path? Some of us need a drink," said the angry gnome at my knees. He had a white beard and a red baseball cap.

I stammered an apology and moved to the side. Pol, Quentin, and Beatriz gaped at the gnome as he shoved past me and hurried to the bar. We watched in wonder as he clambered on a specialized seat and waved at the bartender.

"Where do you want to sit?" Pol asked.

"Over there," I pointed at an empty table.

We walked over and sat down. I looked at the bar and the bartender behind it. He looked like a kind man, but his strong arms reminded me that he could tear apart anyone in the room. I watched as he chatted with the many people sitting at his bar. He had a ready smile on his face. I spotted what looked like a brooding vampire in the corner. Around us I identified a few shifters. I guessed what they were because they reminded me of the shifters at the Center. There were a few men in capes who I supposed were wizards. I couldn't keep up with all the different types of supernaturals.

"Shall we all take ours off?" Quentin felt his charmstone.

"Seems like there's no point. They're all supernatural," I said.

"We could guess what each one is," he replied.

"Wait," Beatriz warned us.

"What?" we replied in unison.

"If we take them off, they'll know we're human. Didn't the dragon shifters say that?" she said.

We gave each other uneasy looks. "Maybe we should keep them on

display," Quentin said upon second thought.

A waitress appeared at my elbow. I glanced up at her. She smacked her gum and handed us four menus. "Hi, I'm Greta. I'll be your waitress. I heard what you were saying. You probably shouldn't be talking so loud." Greta smacked her gum again. "Shifters can hear really well, so if you want to gossip about them, this probably wouldn't be the place to do it. And you're right, you should keep your charmstones on."

I gaped at her. The others looked just as stunned as I was.

"I suggest you enjoy the meal and play whatever game you're playing somewhere else where shifters won't overhear you. Probably someplace that's loud," she continued.

"Do you recommend a place?" Pol asked her. The rest of us gave him shocked looks. Beatriz even slapped his arm for his audacity.

A lopsided grin appeared on Greta's face. "I like you."

Pol ducked his head.

Her face assumed a thoughtful expression as she mulled over his question. "Maybe the vampire lounge would be your best bet. There's a place called *Shades*. It's in Eixample. If you really want to see different types of supes, you should go there."

"They'd let us in?" Beatriz asked.

Greta shrugged. "I'm not sure, but it can't hurt to try. Your charmstones should make it okay. I'll be right back. Figure out what you want to eat."

"So it looks like we know what we're going to be doing tomorrow night," Pol grinned.

"I guess so," I said.

"We're going to a vampire lounge," Beatriz said, a thrilled note in her voice.

I couldn't believe this was my life.

Chapter 23

"Do you think we'll see any trolls or goblins? The gnome we saw at *Miguel's* was cute, wasn't he? Or do you think we'll see some weird creatures? Do you think there are banshees?" Beatriz hadn't stopped asking questions since our waitress at the restaurant suggested we go to the vampire lounge.

"Will you stop?" I covered my ears. I laughed and uncovered them once I saw her expression. "Do you want to go tonight?"

Beatriz had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry, I'm just so excited." Her eyes lit up. "Do you think it's going to be full of vampires?"

"It *is* a vampire lounge," Quentin said.

We were sitting in the courtyard of the Center watching a challenge. We were in Enemy Combat and Self-Defense class. Ever since last night, Beatriz hasn't been able to stop speculating about what kind of creatures we were likely to run into, and to be fair I was excited at the prospect of learning more of this world as well.

"What would you do if a vampire asked to suck your neck?" Pol teased her.

Her eyes widened. "No, they wouldn't."

"Would you let him?" he insisted.

She gulped. A flush rose to her cheeks.

"Stop teasing her," I scolded him. He laughed and Quentin joined in.

"Would you let a vampire suck on *your* neck?" I arched an eyebrow.

"If he was attractive, why not? I'll try anything once," Pol replied, laughing.

I shook my head. "You wouldn't."

"Just try me." He gave me a saucy smirk.

"We'll find out I guess," I said.

Beatriz watched our exchange. "What would your top three sightings be?"

"I'd love it if I could see a minotaur," Pol admitted.

Quentin raised his eyebrows. "That would be interesting."

I let my gaze travel around the courtyard. Our two classmates Iris and Jordi had just completed their challenge. They shook hands and withdrew. The next challengers, Franco and Oliver, stepped up to the ring. I continued looking around us and my eyes fell on Leire. She was

talking to Elena and Kevin, her haughty expression indicating that she was lecturing them on one thing or another. As if feeling my eyes on her, she turned to me and we glared at each other. I didn't look away. Her expression darkened. She briefly glanced at the ring. This was the same place I had fought her before. I don't know what had come over me and I still had no memory of what had taken place, but I had beaten her badly enough to put her in the infirmary. It wasn't like I was her favorite person to start with, but that day had changed our dynamic for the worse. From the hatred in her eyes as she stared me down, I knew she considered me her enemy. I didn't care. I didn't like bullies and beating her had kept her away from me for the past few weeks.

"Vanessa, who's that looking at you?" Beatriz nudged me with her elbow.

I tore my gaze from Leire and turned to Beatriz. She nodded toward someone standing in the distance.

A young teen stood next to a tall, muscular shifter. The teen gave me a cheery wave when I looked at him. I waved back with a smile of my own. "Who is he?" Beatriz hissed.

"That's Christopher," I replied.

"Which one? The hottie?"

I glanced at the man who was standing by Christopher.

"That's the Enforcer," I whispered, fully aware that the shifters could hear me if they focused.

"The Enforcer?" she squeaked so loudly that I winced. They wouldn't be able to miss that.

Pol leaned in. "You know the Enforcer?"

Even Quentin looked impressed.

"I know Christopher," I said weakly. I didn't tell them that I'd spoken to the Enforcer too. My face flushed as I remembered my literal run-in with the giant shifter after my fight with Leire.

"Who's Christopher?" asked Quentin.

"He's the reason I'm in the program."

I watched as Christopher and Enforcer continued to talk. My friends turned to me, and Quentin asked, "What do you mean he's the reason you're in the program?"

"When I first applied I was rejected," I confessed. "I came back the next day and saw Christopher being bullied or what looked like it at the time. I stepped in and he took me to Guillen. He told him to enroll me."

Quentin frowned. "That's strange."

"I know, tell me about it. He told Guillen I was his knight."

"What does that mean?" Pol asked.

I shook my head. "I have no idea. All I know is that I was

immediately admitted into the program even though they rejected me the previous day. Christopher made it happen."

Beatriz looked thoughtful. "There are only twelve rooms."

"What?" Quentin looked confused.

"Twelve rooms in our wing." She looked at me like I should know what she meant. I stared at her, bewildered.

"There was a thirteenth participant. The guy Guillen kicked out. Leire's friend." Beatriz fidgeted as realization washed over her. "That's why she hates you. She thinks you took her friend's spot."

My shoulders slumped. "I guess so."

"But how would she know it was Vanessa who took it?" Pol asked with a frown.

Beatriz twisted a strand of hair around her finger. "I don't know. But it makes sense, doesn't it?"

He shrugged. "Only if she knew that Vanessa was a last-minute add-on."

We all stared at the teenager standing with the Enforcer. Pol whistled softly.

"What?" we asked him.

"He looks really young."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"So why do you think they listened to him?" Pol's voice dropped to a low whisper.

I shrugged and shook my head. "Don't know. I wondered the same thing. He obviously has some sort of power or standing within the dragon shifter ranks."

"Obviously." Beatriz stared at Christopher as if she would find out the answer that way. "He must be important and be older than he looks."

"How old do you think he is?" Pol narrowed his eyes, studying Christopher.

I shrugged again. "I have no idea."

"Hush, he's coming over." Beatriz elbowed me.

I glanced back toward Christopher and saw that she was right. It was only a moment before he was standing in front of me. "Hi, Vanessa."

"Hi." I gave him another short wave, feeling stupid as soon as I did it.

"Who are your friends?" Christopher smiled at each of them.

"This is Beatriz, Pol, and Quentin." They all said hi. "Guys, this is Christopher."

"How's the class?" Christopher spared a glance for the challenge occurring behind him.

"It's alright," I said. The truth was we were too busy gossiping

about him to pay attention to what was going on in the class.

He settled down besides me, surprising me. He leaned back on his elbows, his crossed legs stretched out in front of him. His eyes watched the challenge in the ring. "Are you guys enjoying the training?"

"Yeah," we all murmured.

He laughed. "You can tell me the truth. I won't tell anyone," he said with a conspirator wink.

"It's different," I said.

Quentin snorted.

Christopher gave him a wide grin. It made him appear younger than he already looked. "Have you gotten accustomed to where you are?"

I gave him a blank look and at a glance I noticed the others giving him the same.

He waved at the courtyard. "You're in the Center with dozens of dragon shifters around you. Have you come to terms with the existence of magic or are you still being blown away?"

"Still being blown away," Quentin admitted.

Christopher gave us a curt nod. "It's going to take you some time to get adjusted to it. I don't think you ever fully get used to it. You never get over how wonderful this magic is."

"What do you do?" Beatriz blurted.

I elbowed her, horrified. A flush rose to her face. Pol and Quentin bit back their grins. Christopher gave her a sideways glance. "What do you think I do? I'm a simple dragon shifter."

She narrowed her eyes. "I don't think so."

"Why do you say that?"

"The Enforcer wouldn't be paying such close attention to a simple dragon shifter."

"Oh, so the Enforcer only pays attention to important dragons?" Christopher said with an undercurrent of laughter in his voice.

She shook his head. "No, but it makes sense, doesn't it?"

Christopher smiled. "Yes, it does. You're observant. Talking to the Enforcer ups my street credit, doesn't it?"

Our instructor, Enzo, called out. "Pol. Beatriz. You're in the ring."

Pol and Beatriz got to their feet.

Christopher took that as his cue to leave. "I'll see you around, Vanessa."

We watched him walk away. Quentin turned to me. "He's more important than he claims to be."

I nodded. Christopher's self-deprecating chatter didn't distract me from the truth. Christopher had somehow forged my entrance into the program. I had to find out what his role in the Center was and what it

meant that I was his knight.

Chapter 24

"Leire." The instructor said her name like a warning. She was testy and clearly had lost all patience for Leire's constant talking back. We were in our Dragon Fundamentals class and the past half an hour had consisted of a heated exchange between Leire and our instructor, Carlotta.

Leire had a stormy expression on her face. "What?"

I glanced at Beatriz. She wrinkled her brow.

"You're getting perilously close to breaking one of the thirteen rules," Carlotta warned her.

"What thirteen rules?" Leire's voice was surly and combative.

"They're the thirteen most important rules for dragon shifters."

Someone raised their hand.

"Yes?" Carlotta gestured at them to speak.

"I didn't see any 'thirteen rules' in the Code of Conduct," said Iris. "Do they just apply to dragon shifters or to us as well?"

"That's because they're not in there. And yes, they apply to you."

"Why wouldn't the rules be in the Code of Conduct?" Iris was confused. After a glance around the room, I could tell that the rest of us were also.

"You only discover them when they're broken," Carlotta explained.

Voices broke out.

"What do you mean they're only listed when they're broken?"

"We're punished for doing something we didn't know was a rule?"

"That doesn't make sense."

Carlotta called for silence. She gazed at us stoically. "It's not up to you to decide what makes sense."

"It must be the contrary nature of dragons," Quentin whispered to me. "Do you think the rules exist, or do they make them up to punish us wherever they want?"

"Who knows?" I shrugged and shook my head. These dragon shifters became stranger every day.

Carlotta's face whipped around to us and Quentin sank into his chair. I stayed still, trying not to draw the dragon's attention.

"What's a dragon's knight?" Pol asked. I was thankful that his question caused Carlotta to shift her gaze to him.

"When they go to bed early," someone joked. I was pretty sure it was Franco.

Carlotta frowned and ignored the bad pun. "Why do you ask?"

I couldn't believe Pol asked. Beatriz kicked his chair and shot me an apologetic look. Pol shrugged it off. In a casual voice, he said, "Every dragon story usually has a princess or a knight. I don't see any princesses here. Are there knights?"

Carlotta studied him as if trying to figure out what he knew. I tensed at her expression. She had never looked more like a dragon and Pol never looked more like her prey. Aware of the sudden tension, the rest of the class quieted and looked back and forth between Pol and the instructor. I tried to make myself as small as possible.

"Usually knights slay dragons and save the princess," Carlotta said finally. "But in dragon shifter lore the knights usually save *us* from princesses."

"What do you mean?" Pol leaned forward.

The instructor made a face. "Princesses aren't sugar and spice and everything nice like they're depicted. They can be bitter and vindictive and insistent on getting their way no matter who it hurts."

Ha. Sounded like Leire.

"Like dragons?" a voice asked from the back.

"Like dragons," admitted the instructor. A sharp smile appeared on her face. She didn't seem to take offense. On the contrary, she seemed quite proud of the accusation. I shook my head. Quentin was right: it *was* their nature.

"How do knights save dragons from princesses?" Pol continued.

"Well, once a dragon names his or her knight, it creates an obligation between them. The knight is now responsible for defending the dragon."

My heart sank. Christopher had been surrounded by four dragon shifters when I had stepped up and demanded that they stop bullying him. Pol, Beatriz, and Quentin all turned in their seats to look at me. The instructor noticed and frowned. I sank into my chair farther.

Was I supposed to fight four dragon shifters? There was no way I could do that no matter how many self-defense classes I took with Shaima.

"Is there a reason you wanted to know about this? Are you considering becoming a dragon's knight?" the instructor asked Pol. The class snickered at the thought of lanky Pol fighting off dragon shifters.

It appeared that nobody had told Carlotta what Christopher had done. I wasn't surprised because I had made sure that that rumor hadn't spread at all. But now Pol had ensured that it would. I wondered what the fallout would be.

Carlotta glanced at the clock. We still had a few minutes before class ended, but it was clear she had had enough of us. "You're dismissed. Go bother one of my colleagues."

I quickly gathered my things and left the class.

"Vanessa, wait!" Pol struggled to catch up with me.

I didn't want to wait for him, but I knew there was no way to avoid him. We were heading to the same class after all. He caught up with me. "Hey, don't be mad at me."

"Why did you do that? Why did you ask in front of the whole class?" I hissed at him.

"I was curious. I wanted to know what kind of pull Christopher had. Aren't you curious about what it means?"

I was curious, but I wasn't about to admit it to Pol. "Now everyone knows."

Pol shrugged it off. "No one had any idea what I was talking about except for the instructor, and she can't think you're a knight." His eyes became intense. "Vanessa, we need to find out as much as we can about this. Like you said, the more we know about this world, the better prepared we would be if they ever take the charmstones away."

"Why are you worried about them taking away your charmstone?" I asked him with a frown.

His expression became blank. I wondered what secrets he kept and if they were as explosive as my own.

Chapter 25

"This is definitely the place," Pol said.

We stared at the building's entrance. We were huddled on the street corner across from *Shades,* the vampire lounge that the waitress Greta had told us about. We had stood there for half an hour observing the different supernaturals walking into the lounge.

"You guys really want to do this?" I asked my friends.

"Yes," Maribel said. Beatriz and Pol had agreed to come, but Quentin had decided not to join us. He said he had coursework he had to catch up on. Instead, Maribel came along, and she was eager to see new supernaturals.

"So, let's go in." Maribel strutted ahead of us. She crossed the street and made her way to the entrance of the vampire lounge. The bouncer looked down at her. Maribel gazed up at the tall supernatural. She stood several heads above Maribel, making our classmate look tiny in comparison. The giant bouncer reminded me of a yeti. I wondered if she was hot because of all that fur covering her body.

"Yes?" the bouncer asked Maribel.

"This is *Shades*, right?" Maribel asked her. We were sure of the address, but there was no sign over the door. We were only sure we were at the right place due to the stream of supernaturals entering the building. And the huge supernatural bouncer standing outside.

"Who's asking?" The yeti glowered at Maribel.

"Someone who wants to see the inside," my blue-haired friend replied.

"Why should I let you in?"

"What do you gain keeping us out? There's no reason for that."

"All four of you are human." The yeti pointed at us.

Maribel flashed her earring and showed her the charmstone. The yeti snorted, "I know you have a charmstone. How else could you see me?"

Maribel didn't seem abashed. Pol walked up to the bouncer. "We're not going to cause trouble. We're just excited and want to see some supernaturals in action."

The yeti-bouncer turned to him. "You're a little young to be in there."

"Is there a rule about keeping us out?"

"No rule," the yeti grunted.

Pol gave her a winning smile. He was charming and he knew it. He

had a lazy confidence that, for reasons I couldn't figure out, could melt even the strongest of resolves. The corners of her mouth tugged upward. I tried to keep a straight face. It was fascinating to see Pol's charisma in action. It was his own special brand of magic.

"We won't be too long. We have to be back at the Center by eleven," he told her with a mischievous wink.

The yeti moved aside grudgingly. "Don't be too long. Have a good time."

Pol gave her a lazy grin. "Thanks." He walked into the lounge and the rest of us quickly followed him.

"That was amazing," Beatriz whispered to me.

I nodded. "He has a talent." I wondered if his talent was more than it appeared to be.

Pol caught me staring at him and beamed. "Impressed?"

I laughed.

We stood there taking it all in. I didn't know about the others, but I was overwhelmed at the different varieties of supernaturals around us. There were so many vampires that I was overwhelmed. They were absolutely beautiful. Among them were creatures with pointed ears, sharp teeth, claws, and appendages that looked like leaves. A couple of the creatures had wings. I didn't know what most of them were.

The hostess approached us. "Four in your party?"

"Yes," Maribel said.

"Follow me," the hostess said and she sashayed away. We followed her as she took us halfway through the restaurant toward the DJ booth. I nudged Beatriz when I realized that the DJ was a vampire. Her eyes lit up in excitement. The music was loud and vibrated my whole body down to the bones. Greta was right: it would be easier to gape at the supernaturals here. We could barely hear ourselves think, and I doubted shifters would be able to hear us talking about them.

We sat down at the table the hostess pointed at.

"This is incredible," Maribel yelled. "Look at all the vampires."

We all nodded. All the vampires had a shining quality about them, something like a glamour that made their features look eerily perfect. It was uncanny.

"Is that blood?" Beatriz asked, pointing at a vampire. The vampire had her fangs extended and was holding a martini glass full of a deep-red liquid. She took a sip and licked her lips. Beatriz had a queasy look on her face. "Where do you think they get the blood from?" she asked, not tearing her eyes away from the thirsty vampire.

"I don't want to think about it," I said. My mind went to humans and small animals.

Maribel picked up a menu off the table and pointed at an item. "It says what it is right here."

"What is it?" I asked.

"'Blood is sourced fresh daily from willing participants.'" She glanced up. "It even lists the blood by type. Do you want a round of A-positive?"

Beatriz made a face. "No!"

A waitress appeared. "Food or drinks?" We ordered some appetizers after some deliberation.

"I want to check out the dance floor. Who wants to join me?" Maribel asked.

"I will." Pol slipped out of his chair and extended his hand to Maribel. She grabbed it and they made their way toward the crowd of writhing bodies.

"This is crazy," Beatriz said.

"I know, right?" I couldn't believe that I was in a vampire lounge. I still had a difficult time fully accepting that this world was real to begin with.

Our waitress came back with our appetizers and we ate them as we stared at the supernaturals around us. Pol and Maribel came back laughing with stories of all the creatures they had danced with. "A fairy danced with me!" Maribel exclaimed. "This is so cool! Don't you want to go and dance with the supernaturals?"

Beatriz and I shook our heads. We were overwhelmed with all the people in the lounge. I needed time to process it. Beatriz just wanted to admire them from afar.

"Anyone need to use the restroom?" I asked. Beatriz and Maribel declined, preferring to gape at the many creatures around us. I went to the restroom alone, making my way through the throngs of supernaturals. I entered the restroom and saw a vampire applying lipstick and two nymphs gossiping about a minotaur. I tried not to stare at their inhuman limbs. I would have to tell Pol about the minotaur. It was the one supernatural that I knew he wanted to see.

I finished my business and washed my hands. As I left the restroom, somebody bumped into me.

"Excuse me," I said automatically.

"Oh, you're excused, all right," a gravelly voice replied.

I looked up and stepped back. A vampire leered at me and leaned closer to my face. "What's a pretty morsel like you doing in a dodgy place like this?"

I didn't respond. My heart rate sped up as his smile widened. My gut screamed danger.

"I haven't had breakfast yet," he mused, taking a step toward me. His eyes went to my neck. "I could use a little snack like you."

"Umm, not interested," I gulped.

The vampire threw his head back and laughed. It made me

shudder. "Since when does food say it's not interested in being eaten?"

I licked my lips and I saw his eyes follow the movement. I looked for an exit, but he had cornered me with my back against the wall. The only option was to go back into the restroom, but I would effectively trap myself in there and I would have no escape if he followed me in.

I could hear my heartbeat in my ears.

He stepped closer. I clutched my pendant and the vampire's eyes narrowed in on it. "Oh, and you are a forbidden snack. All the sweeter to consume."

He leaned forward, and I braced myself, preparing to use my self-defense training when a voice said, "What are you doing here?"

The vampire hesitated, his eyes narrowed. He glanced over his shoulder. He straightened and turned around after he saw the person who had interrupted him.

I almost gasped in relief at the familiar face. It was one of the dragon shifters from the cafeteria. He didn't seem to notice me because he was so intent on the vampire.

"Percy, who are you terrorizing now?" the dragon shifter said. His gaze casually slid over me and paused as recognition washed over him. He blinked and his eyebrows knit together in a frown. "What are you doing here?" He turned back to the vampire. "You know better than to mess with our initiates, Percy."

The vampire sneered. "You're not worthy, shifter scum."

I stood there frozen as the two supernaturals glared at each other. Just when I thought the tension would be unbearable, the door of the restroom opened, breaking the showdown. The vampire straightened, turned on his heel, and moved past the dragon shifter. "I could get a better breakfast," he murmured as he left.

The dragon shifter's head turned to watch him leave then turned back to me. His eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here?" he asked again.

I licked my lips, my throat dry.

He looked down at his watch. "It's almost eleven."

Shit.

"Are you here alone?" he asked. His voice had softened after he must have seen the terror plastered onto my face.

I shook my head.

"Get the rest of your group and make your way back to the Center. If you're lucky, you'll make it on time." He pressed his lips together. "I'd walk you back, but I have something."

"Thank you." I don't know how I managed to speak.

"Don't mention it. Just head back before you get into more trouble."

I ran back to the others. "We have to leave! It's almost eleven!"

The others scrambled to their feet and we hurried out of the vampire lounge.

After sprinting for several blocks, we returned to the Center to find the large door closed. We all exchanged concerned looks.

We were too late.

Chapter 26

"Do we knock?" Beatriz asked tentatively.

It was past eleven at night. We had stayed too long at the vampire lounge, *Shades,* and as a result, we missed curfew. The four of us stood outside the Dragon Research and Authority Center dumbfounded by our stupid mistake. The dragons had warned us not to be late. The massive door was closed tight.

"It can't hurt to try," Maribel replied. She walked up to the front door and knocked. Nobody answered. We glanced at each other.

"Any ideas?" I asked Pol.

He shook his head. "We can't stay on the doorstep. Maybe we should go back home?" The rule at the Dragon Research Initiate Program was that during the week we had to stay at the Center. We could, however, go back to our homes over the weekend after signing out.

"It's Thursday," Beatriz said. "Do you think it will be an issue?"

"Should we go home?" Maribel echoed.

"Is there a rule about going home during the week?" I asked the others. Pol shrugged.

"I don't know," said Maribel.

"We're *supposed* to stay at the Center during the week," admitted Beatriz.

"Well, it doesn't make sense to sleep on the doorstep," I said.

We exchanged glances. "Going home is the only thing that makes sense," Pol said. "We'll go home tonight and show up for class tomorrow. Does that sound okay?"

The rest of us murmured our agreement.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" Pol asked.

"Yeah," I said.

I turned toward the street to head home and a new voice spoke up behind us. "I wouldn't leave if I were you."

We all spun around simultaneously, hoping that someone was at the door about to let us in, but the door was still closed. There was no one there. "The dragons won't like it," the voice said again. I looked up. It was a gargoyle. He stretched like a cat and yawned.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"Guillen will be mad at you," he said casually.

Pol, Maribel, and Beatriz looked at me. The gargoyle knew Guillen. The gargoyle also knew what happened to people who showed up

after eleven. "We should probably listen to him."

"So we should stay here all night?" Beatriz asked. She wrinkled her brow.

"Yes, sleep on the doorstep. It would be better than you leaving. Your punishment will be less severe. If you leave, you won't be asked back. They'll take your charmstone or worse..." the gargoyle's voice trailed off. "But what do I know? I'm just a gargoyle." He shook his body and lay still against the stone wall once more.

We glanced at each other nervously.

"He's right," Maribel said.

"This is ridiculous," said Beatriz.

"It doesn't look like we can do anything else." Pol moved to the door and sat down, leaning against it. He tucked his knees against his chest. "Better make yourselves comfortable. It's going to be a long night, and we're going to be really sore in the morning."

The rest of us got down to the ground and attempted to make ourselves comfortable. The stone was hard. There was a coldness to the stone that leached the warmth out of my body, chilling me to my bones. This was not going to be fun.

Barcelona always had people walking around at all hours. It wasn't too late at this time, so we spent some time watching people walk down the street. They gave us strange looks but continued on their way.

Someone came around the corner: Christopher. He noticed us against the door and changed his path, ambling toward us. He raised an eyebrow. "In trouble with Guillen already?"

I shrugged.

"You know this isn't good, right?" He looked at each of us in turn.

"What's going to happen?" Beatriz asked.

Christopher ran a hand through his hair, messing it up as he mulled her question over. "It depends on them."

"Who's them?" she asked. Her voice was beginning to shake.

"The gatekeepers. They hate it when initiates don't respect them."

"Who are the gatekeepers?" Pol asked.

"*What* are the gatekeepers?" Maribel added.

"It's not my place to tell you." He removed his hand from his head and shoved both his hands into his pockets.

I frowned. Christopher rapped on the door with a distinctive knock. I heard a lock turn. A familiar face glared at us. "What is it?"

Christopher just stared at the boy at the door patiently. With a huff, the boy stepped back and opened the door just wide enough for us to sneak in. Christopher made a gesture with his hand, encouraging Beatriz to enter. She did. Maribel scrambled to her feet and followed her. Pol waited until I got up and followed me inside. Christopher had

an approving look on his face.

"You know the rule," the boy warned Christopher.

"I do, but it's only a little time after eleven. They're still new," he said, smirking.

The boy sighed. "One exception leads to another. New or old, the rule remains the same."

Christopher's smile softened a bit. "Let the gatekeepers deal with them. They don't need to sleep on the doorstep tonight."

The boy huffed. He marched back to his seat.

Christopher turned to us. "I'm afraid this is the most I can do. I won't be able to help with the gatekeepers or Guillen finding out." He glanced at the boy. "He'll tell them I let you in. You'll have to deal with the fallout." He turned to walk away but paused and turned around again to tell us one last thing. "Just confess you made a mistake. Good luck." And with that, he left us in the dark and quiet lobby with the still-huffing boy.

We made our way up the staircase. "Did you see how the boy backed down immediately when Christopher asked him to let us in?" Beatriz buzzed.

"Yeah," I said, still wondering what Christopher's authority was. Who was he in the dragon shifter hierarchy? Why did so many of them bow down to his authority?

"He's still going to tell Guillen," Pol added.

"Yeah, but he made him open the door despite the gatekeepers." I found myself feeling a little defensive of Christopher.

We reached the landing. Pol spoke up again. "Who do you think they are?"

"I don't know." Every day I learned something new and added a few more questions to my list.

"Who do you think he is?" he continued.

"I heard he's the Enforcer's brother," Maribel spoke up.

We turned to her. "What? How do you know that?"

"Leire said so," she shrugged.

I frowned. "How does she know?"

"She's trying to find out all she can about the Enforcer."

Beatriz snorted. "How predictable of Leire, trying to cozy up to power."

"Yeah, his brother is some sort of advisor," Maribel continued. "She couldn't figure it out, but she found out Christopher's a fierce fighter just like his brother."

This whole thing just didn't make sense. If Christopher was a fierce fighter, then why had the other four dragon shifters been challenging him? And why did he chose me to be his knight? Leire must be wrong.

I didn't have any answers, but one thing was for sure: I had to find

out more about Christopher.

Chapter 27

The next day in class, Pol, Maribel, Beatriz, and I were beat. It was probably well after midnight when Christopher came and let us into the building. Needless to say, waking up early the next morning to go to class left us all drained.

I sat in the back of the classroom trying not to doze off again when I saw Leire glance over her shoulder and smirk. I frowned. What was she up to? She raised her hand in the air.

"Yes?" Guillen asked in a resigned tone.

"Is one of the thirteen rules staying out late beyond eleven?" she asked in the most sickeningly innocent voice.

I snuck a sideways glance at Beatriz. Pol and Maribel were sitting in the row ahead of us.

Guillen didn't miss our interplay. "What are you talking about?"

Despite the question, Guillen sounded resigned. It seemed that the instructors were as tired of Leire's troublemaking as we were.

She continued, "You mentioned that there were thirteen rules, but we'd only find them out when they were broken. Is staying out beyond the door closing one of those rules?"

"Are you obtuse?" The dragon shifter tapped a ruler against his thigh.

Leire scowled.

Guillen continued to glare at her. "You were clearly informed that staying out beyond eleven at night was a rule. So how can it be one of the thirteen rules if you were notified of it *and* it's mentioned in your Code of Conduct?"

Leire crossed her arms, her face dark with anger. "Well, I know some people were out late last night and they didn't get punished."

The rest of the class started glancing around and speculating who she was talking about. Most of them had been in their rooms when we returned to our wing. I wondered if anyone other than Leire had noticed we hadn't been there.

Guillen's hand froze, the ruler stopping halfway to his thigh. "And you've taken it upon yourself to remedy this oversight? Have you been promoted to instructor without my knowledge?" His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Leire glowered at the dragon shifter, refusing to back down. I did have to admire her bravery. Or perhaps she was just an idiot. It takes a certain type of brass to not cower when a dragon shifter stared at

you the way that Guillen stared at Leire.

Beatriz curled her hands into fists. "I'm going to kill her," she whispered to me. I didn't blame her. I felt exactly the same way. I had no idea why exactly Leire had it in for me, but now she was trying to get the others in her quest of vengeance against me. The instructor continued the class.

"What's her problem?" Beatriz hissed at me.

I shook my head. "I have no idea."

"Why was she keeping an eye on us?"

"It's probably me," I said glumly.

The rest of the class was uneventful. I picked up my books, but before we could leave Guillen called out to us. "Pol, Vanessa, Beatriz, Maribel. Stay. Leire, you too."

We stood in front of him as he leaned back in his swivel chair with his arms crossed against his chest.

He took us all in. "I don't know what's going on between all of you, but whatever it is, knock it off. You're all part of the same intake and have to work together." His tone brooked no argument. His eyes bore a hole into Leire especially.

She fidgeted under his gaze. "But they broke the rules."

Guillen sighed. "Yes, and we were aware of it. Your desire to land your fellow classmates into trouble demonstrates poor judgement on your behalf. Congratulations, you will be given the same punishment they will."

"But that's not fair!" she burst out.

I bit back a grin of satisfaction. Served her right.

Our instructor smiled grimly at Leire. "Life isn't fair. If you continue to choose to create trouble for others, then you'll quickly find that trouble will land on your doorstep."

Leire glowered at us as if it was our fault that she was in this mess, but we weren't the ones who caused her to be punished. A part of me was thrilled that she had been identified as a troublemaker and that the dragon shifters weren't going to put up with her attitude, but the other part of me was dismayed that we'd have to spend more time with her.

"You will be informed what your punishment is in a week's time," Guillen said.

"A week?" Pol asked.

Guillen narrowed his eyes. "That's when it will take place. I suggest you behave until then."

I nodded. Leire turned and stomped her way out the door. The rest of us followed her. "Serves her right," Beatriz said. "She's always trying to cause trouble."

Leire stopped and twirled around. She glared daggers at Beatriz.

"What did you say?"

Beatriz paused. Pol and Maribel looked at her. She raised her books to her chest. I noticed her hand was shaking. Beatriz didn't like confrontation.

"I said it serves you right," Beatriz repeated, her voice low.

Leire took a step forward. Before I knew it, I moved in front of Beatriz.

Chapter 28

"Leave her alone," I warned Leire.

"Or what?" she taunted me, daring me to support my threat.

I narrowed my eyes. From behind me, Beatriz said, "Vanessa, don't!"

I ignored my friend. My gaze was focused on Leire. This confrontation had been building up for some time. She had held a grudge against me since I first joined the Dragon Research Initiate Program. Then I had beaten her up in front of everyone. Ever since then, she wanted payback.

"Or I'll teach you a lesson," I said through gritted teeth. "You shouldn't pick on people."

"You? You're going to teach me a lesson?" Leire scoffed. Despite her air of bravado, I could see a crack in her facade where a sliver of fear peaked through. She was scared of me. And she was right to be.

I took advantage of that fear and rushed toward her. To her credit, she didn't back down. I swung at her and she raised an arm to block my punch. She made a grab for my hair, but I jerked my head away and she couldn't reach it. A commotion broke out behind us as our fellow classmates started yelling. I was so focused on Leire, I couldn't make out what they were saying. I didn't know if they supported or stood against this fight, but I didn't care either way. I needed to teach Leire a lesson once and for all.

She kicked at me and connected with my thigh. I winced. That was going to leave a bruise. I made another attempt to punch her, aiming at her stomach but she twisted out of the way before my fist could land. I didn't stop there and immediately responded with a corner kick and my leg managed to reach her where my fist had failed. Leire let out a groan of pain and doubled over. When she stood straight again, her eyes were full of fury. She lowered her head and ran toward me. I braced myself as she hurtled into me. She wrapped her arms around my waist, tackling me as hard as she could, and we crashed together to the ground.

After that, I just saw red. She sat on top of me and started to pummel my upper body, but I grabbed her head and squeezed. She let out a wail and scratched at my hands in an attempt to make me let go. When that didn't work, she went for my eyes. I knew what battles to pick, and I wasn't about to lose my eyesight, so I released her. I quickly punched her in the gut, pushing her off of me and onto her

back. I scrambled on top of her and straddled her chest, pinning her arms to the ground. Her eyes were wide with fear. *There it was*. It had finally made a full appearance.

From deep inside me a sense of satisfaction rose. I tried to squash it down, not wanting to explore this familiar reaction. This wasn't who I was, and I knew that it wasn't healthy. I knew it as my hands continued to beat her. Unlike our last confrontation, I was fully aware of what I was doing to her. I was also aware that if I allowed myself, I would enjoy my actions. Ever since I had set foot into the Center after joining the Dragon Research Initiate Program, I had experienced emotions such as these -- feelings that were alien to my nature. I didn't know if it was the dragons changing my view of the world or if I was embracing the madness that lay in my genes, the same madness that had landed my mother in a mental institute.

My body instinctively knew where to land the best hits for maximum impact. I could identify Leire's weak spots and knew that if I twisted her wrist at this moment, I would be able to snap it like a twig. I didn't know where that certainty came from, but I knew that it was true. The scary part was that I felt no guilt about the prospect of doing so, of maiming her for the immediate future and possibly for the rest of her life.

But Leire had tried to hurt Beatriz and she had to be punished. That was all that mattered. I raised my hand to punch her, somehow knowing that this would be the blow that knocked her out. Her eyes widened in panic as I reeled my arm back to hit her, but I stopped when I felt a vice-like hand on my forearm.

Chapter 29

I snarled and pulled my arm away from the hand that had just prevented me from finishing my lesson with Leire. I looked up to see a very angry dragon shifter: Guillen.

"Get. To. Your. Feet." He bit off each word in a low and ominous voice. His expression was thunderous.

It was as if a bucket of icy water had been thrown over me. I blinked. The red mist that had clouded my vision began to dissipate. A coldness settled over my bones and I began to shake as the battle rage left me. I looked at the girl I was straddling and saw the primal fear on her face. I could feel the shame beginning to take the place of the adrenaline that was quickly leaving my system. The shame grew stronger as I studied the damage that I had done to Leire. She was bleeding from several lacerations and already bruises were beginning to form.

"Don't make me repeat myself," Guillen warned.

I pulled a leg over Leire and stood up. I winced as my body straightened. Guillen ignored the fallen girl. His eyes were molten fury and stuck on me. "What were you doing?"

"Teaching her a lesson." I didn't have to look into a mirror to know that my face was set in a surly expression. I crossed my arms to hide my trembling frame.

His eyes widened a fraction. I had surprised him. He hadn't expected me to talk back to him. Who would? Ever since I had joined the Dragon Research Initiate Program I had been a quiet student. Yes, I had gotten myself into trouble once already, but nobody realized my hidden depths. And none of the dragon shifters knew the secret I had been harboring. They believed me to be a human, loyal to them for giving me a charmstone and allowing me to discover the hidden magical world in Barcelona. They didn't know that I was a witch. If they knew that they had admitted a fellow supernatural into their midst to learn their secrets, they would kill me.

From the corner of my eye, I saw my classmates rush forward to help Leire. She whimpered as they pulled her up. Kevin threw an arm under her to keep her upright. I kept myself from rolling my eyes. I knew that she would play the victim despite the fact that she had been the instigator of the entire incident. Leire knew how to milk the victim role well.

"Is this the type of fighting Shaima has been teaching you?" Guillen

demanded.

"No," I muttered.

"I would hope not. She would be very disappointed right now." He glared at me.

"Would she?" I couldn't help the smirk that tugged at my lips. "What's the point of self-defense if you don't use it?"

Guillen looked incredulous at my audacity. "That wasn't self-defense. You attacked Leire. If you don't know the difference, then Shaima has been remiss in her lessons. I'm sure other dragon shifters would be happy to teach the two of you the difference between attacks and self-defense."

I repressed a shudder at his not-so-veiled threat, and finally a twinge of guilt began to eat at me as I thought of Shaima getting into trouble because of my actions. Despite the guilt, I said, "I was defending Beatriz."

"Is Beatriz incapable of standing up for herself?" he said, jerking his thumb to Beatriz while not taking his eyes off me.

"No," I admitted.

We stared at each other.

A sound broke my concentration and I looked to my right to see Beatriz standing there petrified, Pol by her side. Her face was white. His was serious for once.

Guillen's next words drew my eyes back to him. "By taking on someone else's fight, you're in violation of the thirteen rules."

"Thirteen rules?"

"Yes, I'm sure you've been informed of them."

I shook my head. "We were told we would be informed of what they were only when we broke them."

"Congratulations. You're being informed now."

This time I didn't refrain from rolling my eyes. A low growl emitted from the dragon's throat. "Go to your room," Guillen ordered. "Talk to no one. You're confined there until a dragon shifter fetches you."

I glared at him but even I knew that there was no other recourse. I was in his territory and had to obey his directives. That and, although I was stubborn, I knew I couldn't take on an adult dragon shifter. I wasn't *that* crazy. I turned away and marched past my friends. Beatriz held a hand to her mouth, still shocked at what she had just witnessed. Pol gave me a sympathetic look. Without saying a word, I crossed the courtyard and left my friends behind.

Chapter 30

I marched away from the courtyard into the Center. I ignored the curious gazes of dragon shifters as I stomped my way through the maze of hallways and up the stairs to our intake's wing. Unfortunately, the heavy door that barricaded us from the dragon shifters was too heavy for me to slam. I made my way through the abandoned space, past the living room and library until I reached a dozen closed doors. Each room belonged to a fellow initiate. I threw a glare at Leire's room across from mine.

I slammed my door and threw myself on my bed, fuming. I stewed in silence for some time before someone knocked on my door. I rolled on my back, propping myself up on my elbows. When I didn't answer, the doorknob turned, and the door was pushed open.

Pol peeked his head inside.

"Why didn't you answer?" he asked me as he slipped inside my room. Beatriz trailed behind him. She shut the door softly with a click.

"Guillen told her not to talk to anyone." She gave Pol a worried look.

Pol raised an eyebrow and I shrugged. She was right.

I could see his clever mind thinking. "Where's your notebook?"

"No, Pol, no," Beatriz warned him, understanding why he needed it. "It's bad enough that we're in her room. She's going to get into even more trouble if they catch her writing to us."

I ignored her and rummaged through my desk drawer. I pulled out a notebook and handed it to Pol. He opened it and flipped through it until he found a blank page. "Pen?"

I gave him one, but he just handed me the notebook instead. I glanced at Beatriz. She was still shaking her head. "We're making it worse. Don't answer him, Vanessa. If Guillen catches us, it will be really bad."

"What do you think is going to happen?" Pol asked me. He gestured to the notebook, but I didn't need to write down an answer. I shrugged.

What happened after I left? I wrote down. I turned the notebook around so he could read it.

Beatriz came closer to read the question. "Guillen lectured Leire," she said. "It was awful. You should see her face. She's been sent to the infirmary."

"Again," Pol added with a smirk.

I couldn't keep the smirk off my own face. This was the second time I had sent her to the infirmary. The first time I had felt badly about it, but this time I had no such grief.

I ignored the tiny sliver of guilt that tried to worm its way into my sense of satisfaction.

She deserved it. Next time she'll think twice before bullying you. I showed the notebook to Beatriz.

Beatriz bit her lip. "Vanessa, you can't really think that. Thank you for standing up for me, but I didn't want you to get in trouble because of me. What happened there? You seemed..." Her voice trailed off.

I knew what she was about to say: *different.* The Vanessa who beat up Leire the first time had been on my mind since it happened. I didn't know that Vanessa. I had expressed my concern to Beatriz not long after that first incident. But this time I had enjoyed the violence. I couldn't help but embrace it. What was I turning into?

Beatriz and I stared at each other, understanding the other without having to say a word. Pol glanced between the two of us. "What's going on?"

"That wasn't normal," Beatriz said finally. "I'm sorry, but it wasn't. You're not like that."

I didn't respond. The pen laid motionless in my hand.

"What are you talking about?" Pol interjected. "That was amazing! Vanessa, I didn't know you could fight like that. I'm going to ask your self-defense teacher for lessons." Pol couldn't keep the admiration out of his voice.

Beatriz gave him a disapproving look. "Amazing? She's beaten Leire to a pulp."

He plopped down on my bed, causing the mattress on my end to rise. Pol's eyes were alight with amusement. "Amazing," he repeated.

"You're going to get into serious trouble," Beatriz warned me.

Although she didn't realize it, she was echoing a thought she had voiced not too long ago. She didn't remember the night I had told her that I saw a vampire being murdered. The assassin-witch who had done it had come and erased her memory of the incident. The witch then tried to wipe my mind too, but she couldn't. That's when she told me I was a witch. I still hadn't told any of my friends.

Well? What do you think is going to happen? I underlined it to stress the urgency of my question.

Pol read my questions aloud and shook his head. "I don't even know. Of all the people in the program I didn't think you would wind up being the troublemaker." The crooked smile on his face softened his words.

I twisted my lips. I hadn't thought that either. If someone had told my father that I'd be the troublemaker of the group, he'd never believe

it. I'd have to mention it to him the next time I visited them. He'd get a kick out of that one.

I looked once more at Pol's warm smile and Beatriz's concerned glare. These were my friends, people who loved and cared about me. In that moment, I came to a decision: I would tell them my secret. I picked up the notebook and furiously wrote, *Beatriz is right. Something is happening to me. I need to tell you two something.* I showed the notebook to my friends and they waited wide-eyed.

Taking a deep breath, I wrote down my secret and turned the notebook to Pol. He lowered his eyes to read it, but at that moment, the door opened with such force that it slammed against the wall. All three of us whipped our heads toward it.

A tall, menacing figure stepped in.

The notebook dropped from my fingers, the confession unread.

Chapter 31

The menacing figure had hair the color of cotton candy, emerald green eyes, and a sharp smile on her face. Carlotta, our instructor, took in the sight of the three of us. We were frozen. Beatriz stood rooted to the spot by my bed, and Pol sat beside me as my notebook laid forgotten in my lap. I prayed that Carlotta wouldn't take an interest and read what I had written just moments ago. Thankfully the notebook had landed face down so even with her eagle-sharp eyesight, Carlotta couldn't read it from a distance.

"Well, well, well," she said. "Even now you defy Guillen."

"We didn't mean to--," Beatriz started.

"It was just--," Pol began.

Carlotta cut them off with a raised hand. I remained silent, watching her warily. Carlotta was the instructor for our Dragon Fundamentals class. She was definitely the quirkiest instructor that we had, and it was unsettling to see her looming so threateningly in my doorway.

Her smile widened. "I'm not angry. I'm impressed."

"What?" Beatriz squeaked.

"It's smart," she continued. "Guillen should have been more specific about the parameters of your punishment and what he meant by you not talking to anyone. He didn't exactly state you couldn't write, did he?" The instructor stared right at me.

I shook my head mutely.

"I'm impressed. As humans living among dragons, you have to be clever." She looked at the notebook and back at our faces, lingering a little longer on Pol's. "This is clever."

A flush rose on Pol's neck. I suspected she knew whose idea it had been. Pol tucked his head in embarrassment. Carlotta's smile grew sharper as he confirmed her suspicions. "Vanessa, come with me. You two better disappear before Guillen comes sniffing around."

"Can I talk now?" I asked her as I slipped off the bed. I tucked the notebook and pen into my desk drawer.

"You just did," she snorted. Carlotta turned around and walked out the door.

I glanced at my friends and Beatriz mouthed, "Good luck" while Pol gave me a crooked grin. His hand rubbed the back of his neck. I hurried to catch up with the instructor. I followed her out of the wing, passing by Kevin who shot me a dirty look, but I didn't expect

anything else from him since he was Leire's friend. I spared a thought as to why he wasn't with her in the infirmary. He had barely left her side the last time I sent her there.

Quentin was lounging on the couch with Iris and Maribel. He simply gave me a sympathetic look. Something twisted inside me. I wondered why he hadn't joined Beatriz and Pol when they came to keep me company. I thought we were good friends. The same could be said of Maribel, but she tended to be a worrywart anyways. But Quentin not coming with Pol and Beatriz stung more than I thought it would.

Carlotta took me out of the wing and down the halls. She made her way down the stairs, keeping a quick pace. As she led the way, a sinking feeling slowly took over me. I recognized the path we were taking. I realized what our destination was. We were headed to the Dungeons.

"Am I going to have to clean the drains again?" I asked Carlotta. The last time I had beaten Leire I had been sent to the Dungeons, two sisters who were in charge of maintenance of the Center. They had taken me into the bowels of the Center where I had seen the most horrible things. I shuddered as I thought of having to go down there again.

The instructor appeared puzzled. "What?"

"We're going to the Dungeons, aren't we? That's where Enzo sent me the last time I beat Leire."

Carlotta snorted. "Why am I not surprised that you memorized the way there?"

"I only went there once," I defended.

"Then you must have a good sense of direction. Most people don't remember the way no matter how often they've gone there."

I shrugged. "I guess I've always been good at finding my way around." I'd never thought about it before. I had always taken it for granted.

We entered the room. Unlike the first time I had visited the Dungeons, the place was now well-lit and organized with shelves against the walls full of interesting items. A large table was in the center of the room. Two sinks were lined up the far end of the room. The Dungeons turned at our entrance. Both of them had twin frowns on their faces. It was uncanny.

"You again," Sinead said, her eyebrows knit together.

"What have you done this time?" Maeve asked me.

"She got into a fight. Again," Carlotta answered for me.

The Dungeon sisters looked me up and down. Maeve asked, "Same girl?"

"Same girl," Carlotta confirmed.

"She doesn't look like the fighting type," Sinead murmured. Her dark eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "She the scrappy sort, yeah?"

"I'm right here," I muttered through gritted teeth.

Carlotta ignored me. She walked over to Sinead and picked up a cyclical metal object. Sinead swatted at her hands, but Carlotta turned her body to study the item. "Shaima's been training her and it seems she gets dragon frenzy."

"Dragon frenzy?" I asked aloud. What was that? *Was I sick?*

"Dragon frenzy? Her?" Maeve's tone made it clear what she thought of that. "But she's a human."

"Will someone tell me what dragon frenzy is?" I looked at the three of them.

"You should see the other girl," Carlotta said, ignoring me again. "She's beaten to a pulp. Guillen had to pull this one off of her." She put the object down and Sinead made a grab for it, placing it on another shelf out of reach.

I reached for my charmstone pendant. Despite knowing they were intentionally ignoring me, I wondered if I had somehow turned invisible. Was there something that had the opposite effect of a charmstone? Was there a stone that rendered humans invisible to supernaturals the way a charmstone hid supernaturals from humans?

Carlotta sighed. "Anyway, she's yours until Guillen decides she's had enough. Do with her what you will. She seems to hate the drains."

My jaw dropped at the betrayal.

"Huh," Maeve mused, finally turning her eyes to me. "Is that so?"

Carlotta walked past me and gave me a little wave with her fingertips. "Behave."

I watched her leave. Then I turned back to the two dragon shifters. Their dark eyes sparkled with glee. My heart sank.

Chapter 32

"It's not good. You humans are supposed to work together." Maeve shook her head. Her words didn't surprise me. I had heard the same thing the last time I had been here.

"Isn't that the point of the program? Maybe Diego should consider dismantling it." Sinead had grabbed the canister off the shelf once Carlotta had left and was now twisting it in her hands. It refused to come apart.

"It seems like you have work to do," Maeve advised me.

"Maybe if you put them in a dangerous situation together..." Sinead's voice trailed off as her hand transformed into talons and she stabbed at the canister. It didn't help.

"Like what?" Maeve watched her sister's failed attempts.

"You could have them fight another shifter," Sinead suggested. She stabbed the canister repeatedly.

"One of the dragons?" Maeve took the canister from Sinead's hands. She twisted it and at once it came apart. She handed the two pieces back to her sister.

Sinead grunted, glaring at her. "No, that wouldn't make sense. They're supposed to be allied with us. Give them another shifter to face off."

"The wolves?" Maeve mused.

Sinead reached for a wrench. "Maybe. I was thinking more like the rats."

"Rats?" Maeve raised an eyebrow.

"They fight dirty. It would teach them all a good lesson on how to work as a unit."

"Maybe you should suggest it to Guillen," Maeve said.

"'*Maybe you should suggest it to Guillen*,'" Sinead mimicked. "As if I have time for that stuck-up dragon. He can think of a way to solve his problem himself."

"Just because your courtship didn't work out doesn't mean he's stuck-up," Maeve grumbled. She picked up a wrench from the toolbox and handed it to her sister. Sinead grabbed it roughly and shoved it into the canister, twisting the loose bolt inside.

I watched this exchange in silence. Maybe if I didn't move they would forget I was here and I could leave without having to clean the drains.

Sinead finished tightening up the bolt and put away the canister.

She looked up at me. "If they don't help each other, one of them would be eaten. I think that's incentive enough for them to get along."

Maeve laughed. "I don't think Diego would be too happy with that."

Sinead shrugged. "You come up with something then."

Maeve laughed. "I'm happy it's not my responsibility. Let Guillen figure it out."

"That's what I told you."

"So what shall we do with her?" Maeve nodded toward me.

Sinead grunted.

Maeve chuckled again. "Carlotta said we've got her as long as Guillen's angry with her."

"That could be years." Sinead tossed the wrench back into the toolbox.

I gasped. "What?"

The two of them threw their heads back in laughter. I stared at them, bewildered. "What's so funny?"

"Here," Sinead reached under the table and threw a bucket at me.

I somehow managed to snatch it out of the air before it pummeled the side of my head and knocked me out. I looked down at the bucket and then back at Sinead. "What's this for? Not the drains again?" I couldn't keep the dread out of my voice.

A bark of laughter escaped her. "Had nightmares after those, didn't you?"

"Yes," I admitted. It always ended with me sinking into the sludge and seeing small creatures skittering around me. I was having other dreams too, but there was no need to mention those to her.

"We're going to have you mopping the halls. Go fill it up with water and the soap's over there." She gestured to the sink in the corner of the room. As the water began to fill the bucket, I overheard snippets of the Dungeons' conversation. I slowed the water flow a bit so that I could hear them better.

"It isn't a good omen that he's back," Sinead said.

"Think the lynx will make a play for leadership?"

"Why else would he be here? This is the first Iberian lynx to come here in years."

"Could be he's lonely," Maeve mused.

"Looking to warm his bed, are you?"

"My bed's warm enough. Look to your own," Maeve chastised her sister.

The water had reached the top of the bucket. I grabbed the soap and started pouring it in.

"Next thing you know, the witches are going to be seeking sanctuary here," Maeve said. My ears perked up at the mention of

witches.

"No, not even the witches would have the gall to ask Diego for sanctuary."

Maeve clicked her tongue. "He'll take them in."

"He knows the shifters won't like it."

"It's better than the vampires."

Sinead snorted. "That goes without saying. As if there's any comparison. Any creature's better than those vile bloodsuckers."

"What about demons?" I couldn't help asking.

Maeve and Sinead turned to me in surprise as if they had forgotten I was there. I cringed. Or maybe they just hadn't expected me to be eavesdropping and join their conversation.

"Demons are better of course," Maeve said.

"Why's that?" I lifted the bucket with both hands, it was so heavy.

"They're like us," Maeve replied.

My confusion must have been evident because Sinead clarified. "They're fire beings. Demons are born of flame. We're dragons, we get along well with creatures of fire."

"What about the other shifters? Do they get along with demons? Or is it just the dragons?" I lowered the bucket to ground, placing it by my feet.

Even with all my classes on the history of shifters, it was still difficult to figure out their social hierarchy and relationships with other supernaturals. The dragon shifters taught us a bit about the nuances of their world, but they always saw things from their lens. It was a biased and distorted view of the world.

"Demons are better than witches?" I tried to confirm.

Sinead snorted. "Obviously."

"What would you do if you found a witch here in disguise?" I snapped my jaws shut the second the last word left my mouth. *Why* had I just asked that? I basically had just painted a neon sign above my head that screamed my secret for the world to hear.

"As if a witch could wander around the Center without any dragon shifter being the wiser," Sinead scoffed.

The sisters didn't seem suspicious at my question, so I decided to push the limits a bit more. "Couldn't they just use magic?"

Maeve appeared thoughtful. "We'd sniff her out."

"What do you mean?"

"Witches smell like cloves. Any witch nearby would stink of it."

Sinead's face scrunched up. "If I smelled cloves, I'd cut off her sneaky little head. Can't stand witches, full of curses and ill will," she complained.

"Does everyone feel that way?" I asked them.

"No, not all. Diego tolerates them. The others follow his lead. We

know better. Don't we, Maeve?"

I frowned. "What do I smell like?"

Both of them turned to me and raised their chins. Their nostrils flared as they breathed in the air. Maeve frowned in concentration. She lowered her chin and glanced at her sister. Sinead returned her look. As one, both their heads turned to me. I couldn't interpret their expressions, but they seemed serious. Neither one said anything for a few seconds. I began to sweat under their scrutiny. Why had I asked? Why had I brought attention to my secret again?

"Trouble," Sinead barked. My eyes widened. She started laughing and grasped her sides. "You should see the look on your face."

"Sinead." Her sister reproached her.

Sinead continued to laugh and mimicked me. "'*What do I smell like?*'"

I almost wilted in relief. I didn't smell of cloves. Part of my brain knew that of course I didn't, or the dragons would have sniffed me out from the second I walked into the Center. Regardless, I couldn't reconcile that with the information Aisha had given me. How could I be a witch and not smell like one?

Sinead sobered suddenly. "You're scentless."

"What do you mean?"

"You have no scent," Maeve said. "It's the uncanniest thing."

"Why?"

"I've never come across someone that didn't smell of anything," Sinead confirmed. *Now* the sisters started to become suspicious.

"What does that mean?" I asked tentatively.

Maeve scratched the back of her head. "I have no idea."

"What do the others smell like?"

Sinead's eyebrows knit together. "What others?"

"The other initiates in my intake."

"I haven't met them to smell them, but I suppose they smell like humans."

"What do humans smell like?" *And why didn't I smell like one?* I left my thought unvoiced.

"Stink," Sinead bit off. "Constant stink."

"And I don't stink?" I didn't know if I should have been happy about that or not.

The sisters shook their heads in unison. "No, you smell of items you've handled. The bucket. Paper. Ink." Maeve added, "And the residue stink of another human."

Leire.

"You're scentless," Sinead sniffed the air once more as if to confirm her findings.

"What does it mean?"

Sinead smirked. "I have no idea. You're a strange one."

Chapter 33

"During Eulàlia's rule, she was blessed to have had access to the wisdom of Jacme the Advisor. For every age there is one Advisor."

I was sitting in Dragon Fundamentals. Our instructor Carlotta was lecturing us on former rulers of the shifters. I had woken up in a disturbed state from one of my dreams. My body was sore from the mopping I had done the previous day. I wasn't looking forward to returning to the Dungeons this evening.

Pol raised his hand. "Who's the Advisor now?"

"We don't have one," Carlotta replied.

"But you just said every age has one," Quentin spoke up.

Carlotta paused. She reluctantly said, "It's true, every age has an Advisor. Ours hasn't made itself known yet." She appeared troubled.

"Who was the last one?" Pol asked.

"His name was Jacme. Weren't you listening?" Quentin snapped.

"How long was he the Advisor for?" Beatriz asked.

"A couple of centuries." Carlotta waited for our reaction.

Sounds of awe broke out among my classmates. I turned to my right and exchanged surprised glances with Beatriz. How long did dragon shifter live? Beatriz raised her eyebrows.

"How did he die?" Pol asked.

"He asked too many questions," the instructor replied wryly.

Pol grinned. He didn't let Carlotta's words faze him. "I heard Christopher was the next Advisor."

If Carlotta was shocked at Pol's prediction, she didn't show it. "Who told you that?" she replied calmly, almost exasperatedly.

Pol shrugged.

Beatriz chewed on her lower lip. I hunched in my chair and glanced at the back of Leire's head. She was the one who had discovered that rumor. The instructor studied the class. Seeing that we were hanging on to her every word, she finally gave in.

"Christopher was expected to be the next Advisor, but the Jewel hasn't spoken to him. It's remained silent."

"Jewel?" Maribel spoke up from behind me.

"The Kindred Jewel," Carlotta clarified.

"What's that?" Quentin asked.

Carlotta leaned back against her desk. She steepled her fingers, clearly deciding if she wanted to indulge us further. Apparently, she decided that she did. "The Kindred Jewel is a rare stone. It was forged

in the Age of the Dragons. Throughout our time, it has appointed the Advisor, though it's remained silent since the death of the last one."

"How does a stone speak?" Quentin muttered.

Carlotta frowned. "If it speaks, you will hear it."

"How?" Beatriz asked.

"It's not for you humans to understand. You'd hear the voice in your head."

"What's to stop someone from claiming the stone's speaking to them?" Pol asked.

She placed her hands behind her on the desk and pushed herself forward. She started pacing. We watched her, hypnotized.

Maribel spoke up again. "How long has it been since the last Advisor passed away?"

"Seventeen years."

"What does that mean?" Pol asked.

"Did someone switch the rock?" Leire offered a conspiracy theory.

"Maybe someone stole it," Kevin backed her up.

Carlotta stopped and faced us. "The Kindred Jewel remains. Its silence, however, *is* troubling. Some take it as a sign of ill fortune."

"For who?" Pol piped up.

"For the dragon shifters and our leader."

"Diego?"

At this point, I was surprised that Carlotta was still pandering to Pol's curiosity, but she continued. "Yes, some question Diego's rule due to the Kindred Jewel's silence. There is a faction of shifters that believes that if a new ruler replaced him, the Kindred Jewel will speak once more. Some see it as a testament of his power and authority. They are wrong."

"Why wrong?"

"Diego leads us and he leads us well. Conspiracy theories seek to divide and put another in his place because they don't like his policies and the changes he's implemented."

"What does the Advisor do?" I asked her, finally deciding to participate in the conversation.

"The Advisor is committed to the current leader of shifters. He or she offers commentary and feedback on the rule. The Advisor acts as a mediator of shifter issues."

"Why is one needed?" Quentin asked.

"The Advisor is the ultimate recourse. His or her word can sway Diego's. It's their power."

I frowned. Beatriz nudged me. "It sounds like Christopher. He got the other dragons to change their minds."

I wondered if my dragon shifter friend was destined to be the next Advisor. And if so, why hadn't the stone spoken to him yet?

Chapter 34

"What do you think?"

"About?" I asked Beatriz. We were in the living room in our wing. We had moved there after finishing our homework. Pol sat with us sketching in a notebook. It reminded me of the secret that remained hidden in mine. I had shoved it away in a drawer before Carlotta escorted me to my punishment, and I hadn't opened the subject since. Maybe it was best to keep my secret to myself and get advice privately.

"Do you think Christopher is the Advisor?" Beatriz repeated.

I frowned. "How can he be? You heard Carlotta. The Kindred Jewel hasn't spoken to him."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Why do you care?" Pol asked her, looking up from his drawing. He had drawn two dragons in flight.

"How can you not?" Beatriz fluffed her hair.

"It doesn't affect me."

She sighed. "Of course it does. It affects all of us. Why do you think this program is in existence? It's because Diego decided to have it."

"Really? I didn't know that," I said.

Beatriz flushed. "Actually, I'm not sure, but I think it is. What if the new Advisor comes along and decides to kick us all out, that humans weren't needed anymore? That means we'll go back to before."

My hand instinctively clutched the charmstone pendant around my neck. I couldn't imagine going back to before. It seemed strange that there had been a time in my life that I didn't know magic existed. It felt like my soul always believed it did, and now my beliefs had come true. What would that leave me with if someone came along and decided all humans had to be gone? Would I ever discover the truth about what I really was?

I slipped off my charmstone pendant and stared at it. It had caught my eye from the moment I saw it at the jewelry store. It was shaped into a gold coin with a dragon stamped on it. When I had first seen the necklace, it had a diamond, but the jeweler had removed the diamond and inserted the red charmstone in its place instead. It had fire within its depths.

I looked up at Beatriz and Pol. "I want to go back to *Magic Runes*. We need to talk to Carmen."

"About what?" Pol asked.

I couldn't tell my friends my secret. "I want to know if they'd be able to erase our memories if they wanted to get rid of the program." What my friends didn't know was that I already knew the answer to that, but it worked as a decent excuse anyways. The reason I wanted to go back to see Carmen was because I needed answers, and Carmen was the only witch I knew who may be able to provide me with them.

"They wouldn't be able to do that," Beatriz protested. She looked at the two of us. "Would they?"

Pol appeared thoughtful. "Why not? All it would take is a spell."

Beatriz's expression changed to one of worry. Little did she know that a memory spell had been worked on her.

A stab of guilt hit me. I pushed it down. "We need to know the truth. Only a witch can tell us. We need to see Carmen."

"You can't go," Beatriz pointed out. "You can't leave the Center until your punishment is over."

"I could go with you. They won't know I snuck out."

"No, Vanessa!" Beatriz gasped. "You're in enough trouble as it is. You don't need to land in any more of it."

Surprisingly Pol agreed with her. "Yeah, you shouldn't risk it. What if they came looking for you? Beatriz is right, it's not worth it."

"It isn't urgent," Beatriz added. "It's not like the Advisor will show up tomorrow and kick us out."

"I won't be able to sleep," I said.

The pair exchanged glances.

"We can go and find out," Pol offered. "We'll update you when we're back."

But neither one of them knew how urgent it actually was, nor did they know that I didn't really need to find out if memory erasing spells were possible. I felt a compulsion to understand my secret immediately. I unclenched my fist, placing the charmstone necklace on the table in front of us. "Imagine not having these anymore and not being able to see the magical world. Will you go there now?"

"What's the hurry?" Pol asked.

"It's bothering me."

"Fine." Pol got to his feet. "Come on, Beatriz, before she pushes us out."

"We'll be back before you know it," Beatriz promised.

Chapter 35

Beatriz and Pol walked out of the living room. I followed them to the door and watched until they had left our wing. Immediately after they left, I shut myself in my room and opened the balcony door. I stepped outside and leaned over to see how far away the ground was -- it was far. I turned to look at the wall beside me. The Center was a building that resembled a castle. The facade had large protruding blocks of stone. I studied the stones and saw that I could gain a foothold if I was careful. It wouldn't be that different from the rock-climbing wall in the training courtyard.

I tested the sturdiness of the masonry, running my fingers around the edges of the stones. I could definitely get a grip. I glanced down and looked at the gargoyles littering the building. If needed, I could use them to climb down. They probably wouldn't appreciate becoming a foothold, but I was sure they'd let it slide.

I climbed over the balcony's railing and held onto it as I debated my next move. I took a deep breath. This was it. I moved my hand to the stone in the wall and felt for a place to get a grip. When I managed to do that, I tentatively moved my right foot to the stone, seeking a space. My foot managed to slide into the space between the stones. I moved my left foot to follow it.

I braced myself. I hung there suspended on the side of the building. I lowered a foot, feeling for another opening. I lodged my foot and slowly made my way down the building. I was still close to the balcony and could reach out if I lost my balance, but that safety net grew farther away the more I climbed down.

I focused on my movements, carefully taking one step at a time. One stone, two stones, three stones. My confidence improved as my hands and feet found a rhythm.

As I made my way down, I came to a stand-still when the only stone I could find to place my hands was one tiny outcropping. I couldn't distribute my weight properly and had to grip the tiny stone with both hands. As I nudged my fingers together, my left foot suddenly slipped, and I yelped as my body slammed into the hard stone. My fingers worked furiously to hold onto the side of the building. I tried find a place to insert my foot, but I couldn't find it. My body weight was listening to the call of gravity and I could feel the sweat making my hands slippery as I started losing grip of the small stone that I held onto.

"No, no, no, no," I pleaded as I tried to keep myself from falling. My head was plastered against the stone wall. I was too far away from a balcony to pull myself back up to safety. I glanced down. This whole thing was a big mistake. If I dropped from this height, I'd be lucky to only break several bones. More likely, the impact would kill me.

My heart hammered in my throat as I fought to remain upright. My feet were dangling from the building. My fingers were slowly losing their grip. I blinked away the sweat that made its way to my eyes.

This was it. This was how I was going to die.

My fingers slipped, and I fell.

I felt the rush of air tug at my clothes. I didn't have time to form a thought before something smashed me against the building, knocking the wind out of me. I struggled to breathe, gasping in huge gulps of air. Dazed, I tried to gather my bearings. Something held me tight against the stone facade. I slowly turned my head to see what it was. A pair of eyes blinked at me. I screamed.

"Hey, stop that!" the gargoyle warned.

"I'm sorry," I clung to the stone and studied the gargoyle. Its features resembled a dragon, but around its head it had the mane of a lion. I'd never seen a creature like it before.

"Are you crazy?" the gargoyle asked me. I detected a female tone.

"Yes. No. I don't know," I admitted.

"Get a grip."

I listened to her, putting my hands and feet in the cracks of the stone. I prayed that she wouldn't let go. The gargoyle gave me a quizzical look. "Why would you try to kill yourself instead of walking out the door like a normal person?"

I wasn't about to tell the gargoyle about my punishment, but my expression must have given me away. "Oh, you're forbidden from leaving, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"What's your name?"

"Vanessa."

"I'm Frasia. You'll get in trouble if they catch you. And they *will* catch you, you know. It's just a matter of time. You can't get things past the dragons. Are you sure you want to do this? "

"Yes. No. I don't know," I repeated.

She looked down at the ground. "Well, you don't have much farther to go. From this point on, all you'll suffer is a few broken bones."

I peered down. It still looked like a very far drop to me. The gargoyle whistled, startling me. "Thiago," she called out below.

A gargoyle shifted, his narrow face gazing up at us. "Yes?"

"Keep an eye out on this one. She's making her way to the ground.

Catch her if she slips."

"Why would I want to do that?" The gargoyle sounded disgruntled.

"Because I'll tell the dragons your role in this if she cracks her skull on her way down."

"It's always my fault," the gargoyle muttered. "'Thiago this, Thiago that.' I can't help it if silly humans don't use the front door like they're supposed to."

"Don't mind him. He'll grumble and moan, but he'll catch you if you slip again," Frasia told me.

"Thank you for your help. You saved my life," I told her.

She ducked her head. "It was nothing. Do me a favor and don't get caught. I don't need the dragons breathing down my neck. Now have you gotten a good grip? I'll let go of you slowly now."

"Okay," I said.

The pressure of her grip lessened as she slowly withdrew her clutch. I took a deep breath. Knowing there was another gargoyle below me to help if I needed it didn't really help to calm my nerves. I began climbing down slowly. I said hello to Thiago as I passed him. "You're nearly there," he said. "It won't matter if you fall now. You'll just break a bone or two."

Whatever expression was on my face made him laugh. *Crazy gargoyle.* I scrambled down to the ground. I was so thankful when my feet met the dirt that I almost bent down to kiss the ground. All in all, the entire incident had taken a little under ten minutes. Beatriz and Pol couldn't have travelled too far. I headed out on the street.

I saw them up ahead. "Hey, wait up," I called.

The two of them turned around. Beatriz gaped at me. She put her hands on her hips. "What are you doing here? I can't believe you left the Center. What if they went looking for you?"

Pol started laughing.

I caught up to them a little out of breath. Beatriz continued her chastising. Her face was flushed. "Don't be upset." I held up my hands in a signal of peace.

"You're already in trouble. If they caught us together, we'd get in trouble too. Didn't you think of that?"

"Actually, I didn't," I admitted.

Pol grinned. "It's okay. I'll say it's my fault."

Beatriz turned on him. "And what about me? You think they'll care who takes the blame for this? They'll punish us all."

"You don't want to get in trouble. I'll take the heat." Pol rubbed the back of his neck.

"It's not about that." She stamped her foot.

"I could go on ahead if you don't want to join me," I volunteered.

"Fine. Let's go." She turned her back to me and marched away.

I raised an eyebrow at Pol. He shook his head with a wry grin on his lips. Beatriz's overreaction made me wonder if I had interrupted anything between the two of them.

Chapter 36

We made our way through the streets of El Born until we reached the location of the magic store. A sign over the door displayed the words *Magic Runes*.

Pol ambled to the door and pushed it open. A bell jingled overhead. A pleasant combination of scents tickled my nose as we entered: cloves, cinnamon, and lavender. The store was spacious. I looked around and saw a couple of people seated in armchairs.

"Hello," Beatriz said by my side, greeting Carmen.

"Welcome back," Carmen said, giving us an easy smile.

Movement made us all turn to the window seat. A gargoyle peered at us. "Well, well, well. Look who's back."

"Hello, Mateu," I said. Beatriz and Pol echoed my greeting. We made our way to the seating area.

Carmen gestured to the woman sitting beside her. She had fair hair and held a cup of tea in her hands. "This is Natalie."

"It's so nice to finally meet you." Natalie beamed at us.

The three of us exchanged glances, and I wondered what Carmen had been saying about us to this woman.

As if reading my mind, Carmen shook her head. "No, it wasn't me. It's what she does."

"Natalie's a psychic," Mateu helped out.

"Really?" Beatriz gasped.

Natalie's smile grew wan. "Really."

The gargoyle laughed. "Don't ask her to tell you anything. She's notoriously tight-lipped."

"Then what's the point of being a psychic?" Beatriz asked. Her shoulders slumped.

"You can see the future?" Pol asked.

"From time to time," the psychic replied.

I desperately wanted to ask what she saw in my future. Did she know the answer to my questions? I hesitated to ask. Natalie's gaze hitched on mine. "You're interesting." She paused and chose her next words carefully. "You'll have a rough time, but it will eventually get better."

"She knows you're not supposed to be here," Beatriz hissed.

"Because you just told her," Pol murmured, his voice just above a whisper.

The gargoyle stretched his body and jumped off the window seat.

He padded over to us and hopped onto the couch in between the two armchairs that Natalie and Carmen occupied. "Sit down, my neck's hurting from looking up at you."

The three of us sat in the couch across from him.

"Vanessa, will you help Carmen make some tea? This pot's gone cold." Natalie raised her cup of tea.

Carmen arched an eyebrow. "Has it?"

Natalie smiled benignly. I suspected that if I lifted the cover of the pot, steam would float out. Carmen got to her feet with a groan. Mateu smirked, "You're getting too old for adventures."

"Are you talking to yourself?" she shot back.

He smirked in reply.

Carmen led me to the backroom. I followed her in and she pushed the door closed behind us. "So what is it?" A wry grin spread across her face.

"I've been having weird dreams."

"Dreams are normal. They're your body's way of telling you something," she reassured me. "Have you talked to your mother?"

I started. "No!"

"Why not?"

"What if I'm crazy like her?"

"That would make us all crazy," Carmen mused. She filled a pot with water from the filter. She walked over to the cupboard and took out a canister. "But the answer is you're not crazy. You need to find out the truth. I'm pretty sure your mother knows it."

"How do you know all this?" I stared at her stunned. I came here to talk to her about it but it seemed like she already knew everything.

She grinned at me. "Natalie told me what to tell you earlier. I don't really know what's going on. Care to clarify it to me?"

I told her everything while she listened patiently. After I was done, she asked me, "Do you mind if I touch you?"

"No," I said.

She placed a hand on my forehead as I stood there in front of her. She closed her eyes in concentration. After some time, she frowned. I wondered what she was doing. She removed her hand. Her eyes appeared troubled. "You have great strength within you but it's locked. Stranger yet, I had to probe deeply to find it. Your power is very well hidden. Whoever locked it did a fine job."

"How can I unlock it?"

Carmen shrugged. "Take Natalie's advice. Talk to your mother."

"I know what you're saying makes sense, but the thought of calling my mother and asking her about magic makes me anxious," I admitted.

Carmen grabbed my shoulder and squeezed gently. "It's going to be

okay. You're going to be okay."

"What if the dragons find out?" I voiced my fear aloud.

"I won't let the dragons do anything to you," Carmen said fiercely. "If you need me to talk to Diego, I will."

"No," I said, panicked. "Don't tell him!"

"I won't until you let me. Until then, stay out of trouble." Carmen let go of me and leaned back against the counter.

"It's too late for that," I admitted.

"Oh?" Her arched eyebrow invited me to continue.

"I'm technically not supposed to be here." I stared at my toes.

"Where are you supposed to be?"

"My room," I admitted.

"Hmm."

I glanced up. Carmen was looking around the place.

"What is it?"

"I'm wondering if I could spell this to resemble your room so that *technically* you're not in violation, but I suspect it won't go over too well with the dragons."

A surprised laugh burst out of me.

"That's more like it. No need to be so morose all the time. Things will look up. I'm in touch with people and I'll keep asking around, but at some point, you may have to meet someone so that they can examine you the way I did."

"You really can't tell what type of magic I have?" Disappointment leeched into my voice.

"No. I sense a great power inside you, but it's blocked and I can't tell how to unblock it. I don't know the source of the blockage and I'd rather not experiment on you. It may make things worse."

"Thanks," I said.

The water heater clicked, letting us know it was done. Carmen started pouring the water out into a fresh pot. She steeped some tea leaves in the steaming liquid.

Carmen grinned. "Grab the pot and let's get back out there. I'm sure Mateu and Natalie are bickering by now. I'll have to separate them."

We returned to the living section. A familiar face sat among my friends. "Hi, Dina," Carmen greeted her. "I wasn't expecting to see you today."

Dina smiled at Carmen. "I had some free time and thought I'd pass by. Imagine my surprise when I saw my previous clients here." She beamed.

Beatriz looked ecstatic. She loved her ring.

"Hello, Vanessa," Dina said. Her eyes slid to my neck and a tiny furrow appeared between her eyebrows. "Where's your pendant?"

Chapter 37

My hand clutched at my neck, but I didn't find the smooth gold chain. A rush of panic flooded my body. My charmstone. *Where was it?*

Beatriz's mouth dropped open. With a sinking realization I recalled where it was. Before I could reply, Beatriz pointed at me. "You took it off in the living room." Her eyes wide, she looked at Carmen, Dina, and finally her shocked gaze landed on me. "How did you see the store if you weren't wearing your charmstone?"

"That means..." Pol's voice trailed off. He looked at the door.

Beatriz looked at the two witches, the psychic, and the gargoyle. "How can she see you all if she doesn't have her charmstone?"

My face flushed as the realization dawned on my friends. A heavy silence fell over us.

A snort broke the tension. We all looked at the source. The gargoyle looked amused. "Now I see why you called her interesting," he told Natalie.

She made a hushing motion with her hand. "This isn't the time."

Mateu scratched his ear. "I'd say this is exactly the time. Truths are being revealed. I only wish I had some popcorn." He gazed at Carmen. She shook her head with a frown.

"What's going on?" Beatriz asked.

A thoughtful expression replaced Pol's startled one. I could almost see the wheels turning in his head.

"You're one of them?" Beatriz asked hysterically.

"I don't know!" I blurted out. "I have no idea."

"What do you mean you don't know?!"

"What *are* you?" Pol asked.

I flinched at his words. The pressure was building up and I wanted to escape Beatriz's accusatory stare and Pol's suspicious one. A hand touched my shoulder. Carmen said, "It will be okay. Won't it?" She looked at Natalie.

We all turned to the psychic. She wrinkled her nose. "You know I can't answer that."

"Natalie," hissed Carmen.

"You could say something reassuring right now," Dina murmured. She looked upset that she had started the whole thing.

"Things will happen," Natalie said finally.

"What does that mean?" Beatriz asked.

Mateu laughed.

"What are you?" Beatriz demanded, turning to me once more.

"I don't know. That's what I'm trying to figure out," I said beseechingly.

"Did you know this whole time that you weren't human?" She crossed her arms.

I flinched again. "No. I found out..."

"When?"

"During our first week," I finished.

"That was over a month ago. You knew this whole time?" Tears filled her eyes.

"Even Carmen doesn't know what I am," I said.

"But you're a witch, how can you not know?" Beatriz turned on Carmen.

"It doesn't mean I know everything," Carmen said.

"Most witches don't know anything," Mateu added. Dina and Carmen glared at him. He shrugged. "What? It's true."

Mateu looked at Natalie. She continued to ignore him. I understood what he meant. She had all the answers. If she would just tell me what she saw, I'd know what I was. At the same time, I sympathized with her. It couldn't be easy to have all the answers and choose to be quiet.

"You'll discover who you are when it's time," Carmen reassured me.

Staring at the betrayal in my friends' eyes, I didn't think that was the right answer.

Chapter 38

You'll discover who you are when it's time.

Carmen's words seemed to have been on a loop in my head for the past two days and I grew more frustrated the more I thought about them. It was reassuring to know that I would get the answers to my questions, but it was absolutely infuriating not knowing when. *When* would it be time?

"Mind if I sit here?" a voice interrupted my thoughts.

I glanced up and saw Quentin. He didn't wait for my answer and slipped into the chair beside me. I looked around the cafeteria and noticed that there were plenty of other seats to choose from. Maribel sat across from me, but the seats on my right and left had been unoccupied. Beatriz and Pol were nowhere to be seen.

"How's your day going?"

"It's alright," I muttered. I shoved the green beans on my plate. It had been a terrible day actually. It had been two days since my secret came out at Carmen's store and things had grown painfully awkward with Beatriz and Pol. It seemed worse with Beatriz who seemed hurt and angry. Pol simply seemed shocked, but he hadn't said a word to me either. He didn't seem to know what to say to me. We went to class as usual, but we didn't share in banter. I was sure Maribel and Quentin had noticed. Maribel had been extra nice to me. Quentin usually sat with Oliver and Franco during lunch, but yesterday he started sitting with me. I forced a smile on my face. "How's your day going?"

"It's okay." He shrugged. "It's strange how quickly the magic's worn off, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"We went from not knowing this world existed to suddenly being surrounded by magic and it's become so ordinary." He turned to the table full of dragon shifters. I recognized a few of them.

"Yes, I know what you mean. It's funny how the extraordinary becomes ordinary." I turned back to the untouched food on my plate.

"Are you still grounded?" Maribel asked across from me.

I nodded.

"No chance of making up with Leire?" she asked.

I glanced down the table at Leire. She sat next to Kevin and was gesturing with her hands, a snooty expression on her face. Our eyes locked, and she paused. Her companions noticed and followed her

gaze. Her eyes narrowed, but she raised her chin and resumed her story or lecture. Kevin glared at me. He was her biggest fan and sycophant. I stared at him until he looked away.

"Guess that answers my question," Maribel mused. "What did they punish you with? I never asked."

"I'm on mopping duty. I have to go do it after the last class today."

"Thank you for recommending Shaima," Maribel said, changing the subject.

"You're enjoying her self-defense classes?"

"Yeah, she's amazing. I'm learning all these awesome tricks. You should take lessons with her," Maribel told Quentin.

"What for?" he said. His words were a bit muffled due to the food he'd just shoved into his mouth.

"You never know," Maribel shrugged. "We may be targets because we know about this world. It never hurts to be prepared, don't you think?"

"Yeah, you never know what surprise might come your way," I said.

Maribel looked over my shoulder. "Head's up. Your friend's coming your way."

I twisted my neck around to see who she was talking about. Christopher. His face broke into a smile when he saw me staring at him. He approached the table and stood beaming at all of us. "Hi, I haven't seen you in a while. Where have you been hiding?"

I grimaced. "I've been with the Dungeons."

His smile widened. "Gotten into trouble again? What did you do this time?"

"Same thing I did last time."

He chuckled. "You don't learn from your mistakes?"

"Sometimes I enjoy repeating them."

Christopher laughed outright. I couldn't help but sneak a glance at Leire. She was too far to hear us, but the sight of a dragon shifter laughing with me had turned her face purple.

"Join us," I gestured at the empty seat beside me.

He pulled back the chair and sat. He gave Quentin a nod.

"I love your hair," he told Maribel who had a lock of blue-purple hair wrapped around her finger. She froze, stunned at the compliment and then beamed. "Thanks." She lowered her head as her cheeks flushed.

Christopher grinned. He had the appearance of a teenager even though I knew he was much older, but that grin made him look younger yet.

"How are classes going?" He included the others in the question.

I made a face. Quentin and Maribel murmured answers.

A couple of dragon shifters walked past us. I recognized one of them as my savior from my creepy encounter at a vampire lounge. "Be careful of that one," he pointed a finger at Christopher.

"Seriously?" Christopher pretended to be offended.

The blue-eyed dragon shifter threw his head back and laughed. He ambled away from us.

I looked at his back. "I like him."

"Naser? Yes, he's a good man," Christopher confirmed. "You don't know many of the dragon shifters, do you? Just the instructors, yes?"

We all nodded.

Christopher appeared thoughtful. "Maybe it's time to change that."

I felt a thrill at his words.

"Would we meet Diego?" Quentin asked, echoing my thoughts.

Christopher grinned. "We'll see."

The three of us exchanged glances of delight.

"But maybe first you'd better be done with your punishment so that others won't question why you got the privilege," Christopher pointed at me.

I made a face. "Guillen's never going to end it."

"Then I guess I won't have a chance to introduce my knight to Diego."

I lowered my head to the table and sighed. Christopher laughed, and Quentin and Maribel joined in.

Maybe things were going to be okay.

Chapter 39

I stared at the mop and the bucket in front of me. I was getting sick of them. With a heavy sigh, I lifted the mop, splashing water onto the stone floor. I wouldn't be able to make it shine, but I would do my best to scrub it clean.

I heard footsteps approaching me. I looked up and gripped the mop handle in a white-knuckled vice.

Leire looked down her nose at me. She was shorter than me and yet still managed to do it. "So they're working you hard? Have you done enough menial tasks to repent for what you did to me?"

"I'll never be sorry for what I did," I said. I made a point to glare at the several bruises and healing cuts that littered her face.

Leire crossed her arms. I narrowed my eyes and raised my mop as if it were a weapon. "You're getting quite the reputation of being a troublemaker," she said.

"You must be listening to the wrong people. Among the dragons, I've gotten a reputation of a fierce fighter that constantly beats you."

"You got lucky," she sneered.

"Twice."

Her face flushed. "You want a rematch? I'll give you a rematch."

"Fine. State the time."

She considered it. "Tomorrow. Midnight. In the courtyard."

Leire stalked off before I could even agree to it.

I stared after her retreating form. She was plotting something, I would put money on it. Maybe she was going to bring others with her to the fight. I wondered if I should ask Beatriz and Pol if they would join me. I shook the idea out of my head. Beatriz wouldn't want to get in trouble and it was unfair to drag Pol into it even if he wanted to. Whatever Leire had planned, I'd meet it alone.

I dropped the mop head to the ground and let out my frustration on the floor, scrubbing it violently.

"What did it do to you?" a voice asked behind me.

I whirled around, holding the mop out like a sword. Quentin raised his hands in the air. "Whoa there, it's just me. Don't stab me with a mop. I'll never hear the end of it."

I lowered the mop, feeling sheepish. "Sorry about that."

"What happened?" He studied me.

"I don't want to talk about it. Sorry."

He put his hands in his pocket. "I asked Beatriz and Pol and they

said the same thing. What's going on with you three?"

"There isn't much to say." I started stabbing at the stone floor with the sopping mop again.

"Listen, if you need to talk to someone, I'm here for you. Like I said, this whole thing is weird and living with strangers doesn't make for the best situation. If you need a friend, just find me."

"Thank you." I appreciated his kindness but didn't know how to respond properly.

Quentin pulled a hand out from his pocket and ran his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, well... I guess I'll be seeing you." He glanced from the mop to the floor. "Don't destroy the floor."

I watched him leave, wondering if there was something more to his offer. I shook my head, trying to clear the thoughts from my fuzzy mind. I couldn't afford to think of that. I had enough issues to deal with.

I had been so scared of people finding out my secret that I'd forgotten my friends. Now that they'd discovered the truth, they felt betrayed and probably just as scared as I was. What had I done? I had run away from them instead of asking them for help.

It was time to trust my friends and to stop running and start fighting. There wasn’t a better time to start than with my fight with Leire.

Tomorrow.

I hope you enjoyed reading the prequel to the *Strange Magic* series. Vanessa Garcia is ready to fight and will be back soon. Let Fatima Fayez know what you thought of this story by leaving a review, even if it’s just one line long. Reviews help readers and Fatima know what you liked and disliked in the story.

And if you feel like sharing, tell us what kind of charmstone you would choose: Necklace? Ring? Bracelet?

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